

# RECONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF PROFESSIONAL STRESS FACTORS: SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL PEDAGOGUES

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## **Abstract**

The paper deals with the social pedagogues' subjective experience in the context of reconstruction of stress factors. The main aim is to reveal subjective experiences of social pedagogues from the aspect of stress factors they experience and how they express them in various social, cultural, and educational contexts. The respondents were chosen by target convenience sampling, i.e., social pedagogues (N=14), working at education and training institutions for at least two years of work experience; all having higher university education. To analyse the specialists' experience a qualitative method of data collection have been chosen. Reconstructing a multi-layered context of social, cultural and educational diversity, a complex character of professional stress experienced by these specialists has been revealed. Evaluating the semantics of the chosen social pedagogues' reactions to stress, overall stress harm to people, covering all layers of the personality structure manifests itself, and it can cause somatic and psychic complaints, social and professional maladaptation.

***Keywords:** coping with the stress, social pedagogues, individual experience.*

## **Introduction**

Work can be satisfying and engaging, but it can also be stressful and lead to poor health outcomes. Decades of stress research have identified a range of workplace factors that are potentially harmful to health (Cooper, 2013a, 2013b; Sparrow & Cooper, 2014). Stress is considered as a phenomenon of a biological, psychological origin characterized by tension and pressure. According to Colman (2015) stress can be defined as psychological and physical strain or tension generated by physical, emotional, social, economic, or occupational circumstances, events. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggested to understand stress as stimulus or response defining this phenomenon through relationships between the person and a situation/

environment, taking into account characteristics of an environmental event – the process of situation a person transacts with.

Physiological and psychological tension is from time to time felt by nine out of ten inhabitants of the country, therefore, the analysis of biomedical and psychological character of this phenomenon is advanced and understandable (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2009; Gilboa, Shirom, Fried, & Cooper, 2008). Stress is harmful when it surpasses one's resources, it may ruin the nervous system, cause diseases, may be a threat for specialists' health and safety (Lundberg & Cooper, 2010).

In scientific research (biomedicine, neurophysiology, and psychology), all published works about professional and organizational stress phenomenology in the specialists of various professions, stress factors, it is possible to distinguish different levels' stress factors as micro (a personality) and macro (a social environment) groups. In general the authors name the factors of the latter level by such variables as: increased responsibility, inappropriate distribution of duties, control in small details, increased workload, fear of losing a job, insecurity, bad relationship with the director and co-workers, absence of support and help from the director. Occupational activity in human life is very important, therefore, the quality of this field becomes an important component of the quality of human life. On the other hand, because of the aforementioned factors professional stress also becomes inevitable (Bandzienė, 2009; Cartwright, & Cooper, 2014; Grakauskas & Valickas, 2006; etc.).

The changes of macro (new information technologies, demographical situation getting worse, decreasing of the number of school age children, continuing reforms in the system of education) and micro level (pedagogues' work overload, burnout, teachers' attestation, accreditation of schools) bring a lot of innovations, uncertainty, tension, stress. In the context of these changes pedagogues' work found itself in the swirl of a constant process of change. It is important for specialists' professional activity, its quality, effectiveness constantly facing challenges (Bulotaitė & Lapeškieienė, 2006; Bulotaitė, Pociūtė, & Bliumas, 2008; Lambert, McCarthy, O'Donnell, & Melendres, 2007).

The analysis of the context of stress, its peculiarities, coping opportunities is a multidisciplinary concept relevant to many sciences, therefore, it has been analysed by quite a big number of authors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Parker & Endler, 1992; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Grakauskas & Valickas, 2006; Bubelienė & Merkys, 2009, 2012; Kepalaitė, 2013). It must be admitted that the problem of Lithuania pedagogues' stress has been investigated to a greater extent (Bubelienė & Merkys, 2009, 2012). Meanwhile the analysis stress experienced by education support specialists (special, social pedagogues, psychologists, speech therapists) is waiting for a more detailed research; this issue has not been thoroughly actualized, although the field of work of the aforementioned professionals is to be related with an amount of stress. They include as undefined/ over normative activities, different participants' (of the support process) needs and different definitions of the role of support specialists, huge requirements in the social political level to responsible work with children and their families at social risk.

The problem of the research can be defined by the questions requiring new investigations: *What are stress factors and stress experiences of social field specialists, to be precise of social pedagogues? What is the context of their stress expression?*

**Object of the research** – subjective experiences of social pedagogues in the context of the reconstruction of the expression of stress factors they experience.

**Aim of the research** – to reveal social pedagogues' subjective experiences and their expression in social, cultural, and educational diversity.

**Sample and methodology of the research.** The respondents were chosen by target convenience sampling, i.e., social pedagogues (N=14), working at education and training institutions for at least two years long; all having higher university education. To analyse the specialists' experience a qualitative method of data collection was chosen (*semi-structured interview*), during which open questions were used that do not restrict possible responses according to evaluation fields set by the researchers. The questions were formulated on the basis of scientific literature meta-analysis, and the authors' researches revealing stress experienced by adults at various stages of life span, different professions and activities and ways of coping (Bubelienė & Merkys, 2009, 2012; Frydenberg & Lewis 1993; Grakauskas, Valickas, & Kepalaitė, 2013; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Kryukova, 2010).

The interview content-analysis has been made: several categories were distinguished according to respective diagnostic areas (diagnostic indicators), illustrative relevant statements were found out. The rating of every category was measured by a frequency of the notional statements in the category. During the research the specialists' experience and attitude towards the stress experienced in professional activity, the opportunities and ways of coping with it had to be revealed. The research data were processed applying the method of content analysis, using the procedure of open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). For the validation of the data of the qualitative research the expert method was used. The experts were presented with the tables of the qualitative research with previewed diagnostic areas, the distinguished categories and the statements illustrating them. It served to the analysis of the attitude (suitability and reliability) of the presented data. The essential expert's remarks of the expert (naming and specifying diagnostic fields, regrouping and highlighting certain illustrative statements) were taken into account. It allowed striving for clearer and more thorough presentation and analysis of the empiric data of the qualitative research, the quality of the interpretation and presentation of the results.

### The research results and discussion

During the research it was aimed to find out the factors that cause the most stress for social pedagogues in their professional activity analysing the contexts of their subjective experiences (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Stress factors in social pedagogues' professional activities

Category	Subcategory	Examples of statements	N
<b>Inappropriate interpersonal relations in the educational institution</b>	Socially unacceptable students' behavior	<i>"schoolchildren have conflicts with teachers"; "stress is caused by conflict situations, especially an open conflict with a child"; "students' indifference, unwillingness to get involved in activity"; "I am used to meet aggressive students having behavioral and emotional problems".</i>	14
	Parents' indifference and isolating/distancing from solving the child's problem	<i>"unwillingness to collaborate or help a child"; "aggression when it is necessary to interfere and help to solve problems"; "it is difficult to make parents come"; "we cannot make a common decision, or they are not motivated to collaborate, lack of understanding"; "there were several situations when aggressive parents show rage at school"; "parents' complaints, accusations"; "in a very aggressive mood, defensive parents".</i>	14

Continued Table 1

<b>Inappropriate interpersonal relations in the educational institution</b>	Lack of acknowledgement from colleagues	<i>“colleagues do not acknowledge me as a specialist”; “opinion about the irrelevance of my profession”; “not acknowledging as serious, necessary”; “because of the unachieved aim, although I was preparing for it very much”; “not acknowledging works”; “there is a lack of collaboration with the colleagues from other institutions”; “I usually have to do tasks alone”; “...teachers blame me because of children’s behavior problems, because they say I don’t do anything”.</i>	12
	Skepticism of administration, managers	<i>“complicated communication with the manager of the institution”; “absence of support from administration”; “accusations”; “...prejudice, mobbing...”; “the negative things in some professional activity is emphasized and the strengths are not noticed”.</i>	9
<b>Undefined character of professional activity</b>	Unpredictable situations	<i>“you don’t know what kind of day is awaiting for you when you come to work”; “disturbing situations occur”; “unexpected situations”; “there are almost no days without the most various incidents, conflicts”; “I feel bad when I cannot help a child because of an unexpected and complicated situation in their family”.</i>	10
	Work overload	<i>“the worst stress is because of big responsibility and works”; “the wish that I would do that what parents should do”; “I constantly feel I haven’t done anything”; “consultations, campaigns, events, you need to write about them, otherwise it will seem that you don’t do anything”; “many papers that cause disappointment and anger in my direct work”; “you fill them in without thinking much”; “lack of concrete contents in social pedagogue’s documentation was a big stress when I just started to work”; “other tasks are given”; “often you cannot manage to do everything that you must in time”.</i>	10
	Lack of time	<i>“it seems that you won’t ever manage to do them in time”; “often you don’t manage to do everything that you need in time”; “it seems that you won’t manage to do them in time”; “parents call after work”; “work doesn’t end with working hours”.</i>	8
	Changing information in the system of education	<i>“because of various changes in education”; “education standards, curricula change, new requirements appear”; “not knowing something causes stress”; “there’s nobody to ask what and how something should be done”; “various inspections cause the biggest stress”.</i>	9
<b>Importance of personality traits</b>	Disagreement in beliefs	<i>“my personal values don’t coincide with the others”; “for me it is difficult to withstand and hold on in stressful situations”; “often the opinions about solving problems differ”.</i>	5
	Lack of competence and experience	<i>“without having experience I didn’t feel competent enough”; “practice and theory do not always coincide”; “during the first years I was worrying a lot whether I worked well”; “whether I do everything right”; “there’s nobody to ask, but you need to work”.</i>	7
	A state of stress	<i>“constant state of stress”; “you feel stress every day”; “because of stress you are not able to react adequately to situations anymore”; “stressful situations cause my long-term anxiety”.</i>	5

The analysis of the research data allows regarding the factors of professional stress experienced by social pedagogues in a complex way reconstructing a multi-layered context of social, cultural and educational diversity. The distinguished generalized semantic units reveal the ties between different contexts: a personality, interpersonal relations in the educational institution where the respondents experience most stress. Relatively all stress factors can be divided into 2 levels: internal – a personality (pedagogue's values, experience) and external – socio-cultural, institutional (managing, interpersonal relations, type of work), related to education policy and management (Pikūnas & Palujanskienė, 2005; Sparrow & Cooper, 2014).

The research data showed that social pedagogues attribute the majority of the stressors to a social environment context: **interpersonal relations, undefined professional activity**. These distinguished categories and the subcategories have been defined by the largest number of statements.

The context of **interpersonal relations** is reduced by the respondents into different areas of relations described by subcategories. In the participants' of the research opinion, stress is caused by **unacceptable behavior of students** (N=14), that is explained by social pedagogues as conflict situations with teachers (*"students have conflicts with subject teachers"*), manifestations of aggressive behavior (*"I am used to meet aggressive students having behavioral and emotional problems"*), indifference and unwillingness to do something (*"students' indifference, unwillingness to get involved in activities"*).

Pedagogues also experience stress because of students' **parents' indifference and isolating themselves from solving the child's problem** (N=14). The respondents state that parents are often aggressive, do not tend to collaborate, the lack of understanding between them (*"we cannot make a common decision, or they are not motivated to collaborate, lack of understanding"*; *"there were several situations when aggressive parents rage at school"*; *"parents' not justified complaints, accusations"*). The family position is an important factor of teacher's professional well-being. Pedagogues often experience tension and stress not only when problems with students arise, but also when parents do not collaborate with school in order to solve problems. Social pedagogues also experience stress in situations when they need to present information, especially negative, to parents about their children or share it with other specialists (Bubelienė & Merkys, 2012).

**Lack of acknowledgement from colleagues** is also named as a possible stressful factor (N=12). Social pedagogues feel underestimated in the educational institutions communities (*"colleagues do not acknowledge me as a specialist"*; *"opinion about the irrelevance of my profession"*; *"...subject teachers blame me because of children's behaviour problems, because they say I don't do anything"*). Insufficient acknowledgement from the colleagues and lack of collaboration is rather an important problem that can cause tension in professional activity and eventually stress. In the situations when the support from other co-workers (or institutions) is needed a social pedagogue rather often remains alone. Being in a good relationship with colleagues helped more easily cope with negative experiences and the stress experienced at work (Pikūnas & Palujanskienė, 2005). A social pedagogue's profession in comparison with other pedagogues, subject teachers is relatively new, possibly the dissemination of the best practices of this profession is insufficiently developed and educational community of higher qualification category, which would ensure the success in solving many social and educational problems, is not numerous.

In the pedagogues' opinion **skepticism of administration** (N=9) should also be considered a stressful factor. Social pedagogues do not feel support from the managers of the institution, often the negative sides of the activity are emphasized and positive things are not

noticed, social pedagogues are even blamed and pressure is applied (“*absence of support from administration*”; “*prejudice, mobbing...*”; “*the negative things in some professional activity are emphasized and the good efforts are not noticed*”).

**Undefined professional activity**, in the opinion of the research participants, should be considered as another important socio-cultural contextual stress, which is defined by several categories distinguished by the participants of the research.

Social pedagogues experience stress because of **unpredicted situations** in professional activities (N=10). A social pedagogue’s work is not an algorithmic task, after doing which, you can take up another one, it includes constantly changing situations, and it is almost impossible to predict the outcome, duration and consequences of them in advance. A social pedagogue’s work often does not take place as one would like it to or the way it should be, a schedule can cardinally change, because the unexpected situations that occur make one act “here and now” (“*disturbing situations occur*”; “*there are almost no days without the most various incidents, conflicts*”; “*I feel bad when I cannot help a child because of an unexpected and complicated situation in their family*”). Rapidly changing situations and poor opportunities to control them can produce much stress.

**Work overload** that a social pedagogues gets (N=9) and **lack of time** (N=7) are considered as an important factor causing stress (“*the biggest stress is because of big responsibility and works*”; “*consultations, campaigns, events, you need to write about them, otherwise it will seem that you don’t do anything*”; “*lack of concrete contents in social pedagogue’s documentation was a big stress when I just started to work*”; “*work doesn’t end with working hours*”). Pedagogues think that they are overloaded by much work that is often poorly defined, by many documents that are unnecessary from the point of view of the pedagogues, much writing, which distracts from their direct work with children, families, and community. Much work overload and time pressure influence stress emergence and its level. The respondents shared that their work usually didn’t end according to the working hours set in a timetable, but lasted longer, because urgent situations happened all the time.

Pedagogues experience stress because of constantly **changing information in the system of education** (N=10), changes (“*education standards, curricula change, new requirements appear*”; “*various inspections cause the most acute stress*”). External-socio-cultural stressors of such type interfere with social pedagogues’ work, because it is difficult to manage to adjust to the rapid change of the society including the system of education requiring constant and speedy renewal, new skills. Changing concepts of the renovation of schools (National, Democratic, Good School), accreditation, decreasing network obviously has influenced the quality of the pedagogues’ work (Bubelienė & Merkys, 2012).

The analysis of the research data show that social pedagogues trace a part of stressors from the context of personality, indicating the importance of **personality traits**. This context is reduced into several areas described by subcategories. One of them is **lack of competence and experience** (N=7), that is presented by the social pedagogues (“*without having experience I didn’t feel competent enough*”; “*during the first years I was worrying a lot whether I work well*”). The pedagogues state about **disagreement in beliefs** (N=5), (“*my personal values don’t coincide with the others*”; “*often the opinions about solving problems differ*”), **a state of stress** (N=5) (“*constant state of stress*”; “*you feel stress every day*”; “*because of stress you are not able to react adequately to situations anymore*”; “*stressful situations cause my long-term anxiety*”) was also indicated. The research revealed that the respondents often faced the stressful situations where the participants’ opinions were different or even contradicted their personal beliefs. In their opinion, stress causing events can also be evaluated differently

depending on personality traits, when some specialists can cope with stress easily and the others are broken by even the smallest tension or pressure (Bulotaitė & Lapeškienė, 2006; Pikūnas & Palujanskienė, 2005). Because of the lack of experience named by the participants of the research and contradicting values pedagogues can lose motivation for activity, collaboration, free expression of ideas and feelings, tended to the negative factors of personality development, feelings of inferiority and distrust in oneself (Kepalaitė, 2013).

The data of this diagnostic field have revealed the context of the factors causing stress to social pedagogues. It highlights inappropriate interpersonal relations in educational institutions (N=49), undefined character of professional activity (N=37) and the importance of individual personality traits (N=17). The field of social pedagogue's professional activity is complex and multidimensional, he/she must act in it and achieve positive results.

During the research we analysed how usually social pedagogues react to stressful situations at work. For or this purpose the diagnostic area was set during a semi-structured interview (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Social pedagogues' reactions to stressful situations

Category	Subcategory	Examples of statements	Number of statements
<b>Behavioral reactions</b>	Efforts to behave balanced	<i>"I try to stay calm, looking to a stressful situation"; "I feel stress but I try to remain calm"; "I tell myself to stay calm, want to manage, control myself"; "cool, calm mind"</i> .	10
	Walking away from a stressful situation / distancing	<i>"sometimes I go away"; "retreat to the solitude"; "I want to escape from everything"; "I don't want to communicate with anyone, and especially if this person is related to stress"</i> .	5
	Objective evaluation of a situation	<i>"I try to think objectively"; "to analyse everything, to look at the situation from different angles"; "to learn about all opportunities"</i> .	5
	Sharing the situation with other people	<i>"I consult with my colleagues"; "start conversations"; "I consult with other people"</i> .	3
	Making decisions	<i>"during stress I try not to make any decisions"; "I react already after the event when I realize what has happened"</i> .	2
	Difficulties in personal life	<i>"has negative impact on my private life"; "the reaction happens at home, at night, I cry, I fall asleep or I eat very much"; "carrying works with me"; "sometimes I don't manage to detach myself from work"; "I think about my work in the night-time, how to write about something, to calculate the results of the research or prepare for an event or a class meeting"</i> .	5
<b>Physiological reactions</b>	Feeling of tension	<i>"I am under tension"; "I feel tension when I don't manage to solve a problem"; "I start worrying"; "anxiety happens, too sensitive"; "I want to cry"; "irritability"; "the tension I experience doesn't allow easing up at work"; "it's difficult to work under constant tension"</i> .	18
	Feeling of fatigue	<i>"Physical tiredness, I want vacation already"; "fatigue"</i> .	4
	Lack of security	<i>"Sometimes I feel insecure"; "I try to have another person around"</i> .	2

Continued Table 2

<b>Emotional reactions</b>	Low self-esteem	<i>"You lose your self-esteem"; "I constantly analyse what I have done wrong"; "you think that you don't know how to work anymore"</i> .	5
	Difficulties in managing emotions	<i>"Emotions are simply boiling"; "it is difficult to control myself"; "I feel very unpleasantly, I cannot calm down"; "it hurts"; "spoils my mood"; "it has a very negative impact on me"</i> .	5
	Anger	<i>"sometimes I feel anger"; "disappointment and anger"</i> .	3
	Fear	<i>"I go to work with fear"; "fear not to meet my responsibilities"; "fear not to meet expectations"; "I'm afraid that I understand in the wrong way or do in the wrong way"</i> .	
	Apathy	<i>"anger is replaced by indifference"; "I don't want to do anything"; "apathy happens and the question why, because nobody cares about efforts, do they?"; "it takes away the willingness to try, to develop activity"; "I don't want to do any activity except obligatory"; "I get used, I react little"; "failures makes me stop activity"</i> .	7

Reconstructing the context of social pedagogues' distinguished reactions to stressful situations in generalized semantic units admitted the specialists' **physiological, emotional and behavioral reactions**.

The specialists speaking about their subjective experience indicated **behavioral** changes that are caused by stressful situations at work. The respondents try to **behave calmly** (N=10) (*"I try to look to a stressful situation calmly"; "cool, calm mind"*), **want to walk away from a stressful situation** (N=5) (*"retreat to the solitude"*), **evaluate the situation objectively** (N=5) (*"I try to think objectively"; "to analyse everything, to look at the situation from different angles"*), **take decisions after the event** (N=2) (*"I react already after the event when I realize what has happened"*), **share information with other people** (N=3) (*"I consult with my colleagues"; "start conversations"*). Because of stressful situations they experience in professional activity social pedagogues also experience **difficulties in personal life** (N=5) (*"has negative impact on personal life"; "sometimes I don't manage to detach myself from work"*).

In the generalized group of semantic units describing **emotional reactions** the respondents' subjective experience is reduced into subcategories: **apathy** (N=7), (*"I don't want to do anything"; "it takes away the willingness to try, to develop activity"*), **low self-esteem** (N=5) (*"you think that you don't know how to work anymore"*), **fear** (N=5) (*"I go to work with fear"; "fear not to handle my responsibilities"*), **anger** (N=3) (*"sometimes I feel anger"*).

The category describing **physiological** reactions of social pedagogues is semantically reduced into several subcategories. The participants of the research state that experiencing stressful situations they **feel tension** (N=18), (*"the tension I experience doesn't allow easing up at work"; "it's difficult to work under constant tension"*), **fatigue** (N=4), (*"physical tiredness, I want vacation already"*), **lack of security** (N=2), (*"I try to have another person around"*).

The analysis of the data highlighted social pedagogues' reactions towards stressful situations at work. The changes in behavioral (N=30), emotional reactions (N=25), and physiological reactions (N=24) are revealed. The analysis of pedagogues' subjective



experience allowed state that an experiencing stress body and personal emotional sphere suffered, behavior was changing. The reactions that manifested in the research area negatively influence the specialists' physical (fatigue, tension) and psychological (anger, fear, low self-esteem) well-being, which could not allow working productively, but suffering in private life as well.

### Conclusions

Constant political, economic changes, intensive social changes, continuing reforms of the system of education inevitably cause much tension and stress in the educational community (including social support specialists). Professional activities are especially important, and the congruent interaction between pedagogues and social environment influences its success. In our country meeting the challenges of striving for congruence both in theoretical and practical fields is not always successful. The peculiarities of social pedagogues' professional activities, stress experienced by them, it's analysis should receive more attention in investigations and practical help.

Reconstructing a multi-layered context of social, cultural and educational diversity where social pedagogues work, a complex character of professional stress experienced by them have been revealed. The distinguished generalized semantic units have revealed the areas of personality, interpersonal relations in the educational institution and undefined professional activity where the respondents have experienced more distress. All stress factors were divided into internal – a personality and external – a social environment, and the latter caused the largest number of stressful professional situations.

Evaluating the semantics of the chosen social pedagogues' reactions to stress, overall stress harm to people, influence a personality, leads to negative outcomes concerning somatic and psychic, and psychological well-being, social and professional maladaptation. Because of that the specialists' ability to perform professional activity with high quality, to perform tasks, to strive for professional career, personal success and self-actualization can suffer.

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## RECONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF PROFESSIONAL STRESS FACTORS: SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL PEDAGOGUES

### *Summary*

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The paper deals with the social pedagogues' subjective experience in the context of reconstruction of stress factors. The problem of the research can be defined by the questions requiring new investigations: *What are stress factors and stress experiences of social field specialists, to be precise of social pedagogues? What is the context of their stress expression?* The main aim is to reveal subjective experiences of social pedagogues from the aspect of stress factors they experience and how they express them in various social, cultural, and educational contexts.

The respondents were chosen by target convenience sampling, i.e., social pedagogues (N=14), working at education and training institutions for at least two years of work experience; all having higher university education. To analyse the specialists' experience a qualitative method of data collection have been chosen.

Reconstructing a multi-layered context of social, cultural and educational diversity where social pedagogues work, a complex character of professional stress experienced by them have been revealed. The distinguished generalized semantic units have revealed the areas of personality, interpersonal relations in the educational institution and undefined professional activity where the respondents have experienced more distress. All stress factors were divided into internal - a personality and external – a social environment, and the latter caused the largest number of stressful professional situations.

Evaluating the semantics of the chosen social pedagogues' reactions to stress, overall stress harm to people, influence a personality, leads to negative outcomes concerning somatic and psychic, and psychological well-being, social and professional maladaptation. Because of that the specialists' ability to perform professional activity with high quality, to perform tasks, to strive for professional career, personal success and self-actualization can suffer