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Self-efficacy as a predictor of social workers' perceived workload

Poczucie własnej skuteczności predyktorem odczuwanego obciążenia pracą przez pracowników socjalnych

Theoretical foundations of empirical research

The profession of a social worker is one of the public trust professions of high social importance, requiring appropriate personality traits and not only professional but also moral and ethical competencies. Social workers provide targeted and organized help to people who are economically, socially, or physically incapacitated. This activity falls within a broader scope of direct, individualized support measures, generally defined as social services (cf. Szmagałski, 1996, p. 202). In their work, they undertake not only typical support activities, but also those that address social exclusion, caused by poverty, homelessness, and lack of participation in cultural, economic, or social

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life. Often this is a burden beyond their capabilities, and there is sometimes a sense of powerlessness, unpleasant failures, and a sense of loss in the absence of success. A social worker may experience various internal dilemmas when working with difficult people, alcohol or drug addicts, clients who try to manipulate them, mentally ill people or those who are particularly demanding of others, clients who break off contact (disappearing), which is perceived as a personal failure on the part of the worker, or clients, who, in their dealings with workers, evoke strong emotions and strain them by pouring out their own negative emotions, while they relax and play on the worker's emotions and their professional duty to help (cf. Fengler, 2000, pp. 57–61). Working with such people poses an individual threat to the employees, as they are exposed to aggression, most often verbal or psychological, consisting of insulting, showing disrespect, disregarding, or rejecting help (cf. Wierzejska, 2018, pp. 47–48). This emotional strain is extremely exhausting and psychologically costly, and can consequently reduce the quality of the services provided or have a negative impact on the employee's health. This is because, in support relationships, there are intense processes of involvement and emotional exchange with a simultaneous disproportion between giving and taking, which places a significant burden on the personality (Sęk, 2000, p. 99).

In addition to these problems, arising directly from the relationship with clients, social workers face various bureaucratic issues and frequent changes in regulations that impose additional tasks or restrictions on social benefits. The lack of precise regulations, their changes, and the resulting financial constraints are a source of tension and misunderstandings, especially with so-called "gluttonous" clients, or those needing real help that legislators have not foreseen. Employees feel powerless because of the restrictions and are careful not to overstep the rules for fear of being materially liable. This creates anxiety and severe stress (cf. Kosciellak, 2011).

Sometimes the problems of social workers are directly related to their social work environment and the deficits that exist in terms of organizational culture and the appropriate social climate in their team. Sometimes a conflicted environment can be a source of unpleasant experiences, negative emotions, and disappointment (cf. Dudek et al. 2004). This can be accompanied by employees' discomfort due to excessive responsibilities, inadequate pay compared to social demands and expectations, and lack of social respect (cf. Trawkowska, 2006). A combination of these factors can create a difficult situation in their

work in the form of deprivation, disruption, overload, conflict, or danger (cf. Tomaszewski, 1984).

Deprivation is associated with the inability to meet important professional needs for helping people in distress or obtaining due pay for hard and responsible work in situations when the recipient receives more financial support than the employee's salary. Overload is also caused by situations requiring a rigid course of action, working with people at increased risk, e.g. pathological families, perpetrators of domestic violence, people released after serving prison sentences, drug addicts, alcoholics, etc. (cf. Wierzejska, 51). On the other hand, often the pressure of superiors, and the division of tasks and responsibilities can cause conflicts in the team. However, conflicts can also occur between employees and clients. The most aggravating and destructive factor for social workers is insecurity. It will appear when employees experience the loss of key values such as prestige and recognition, their development opportunities are limited (as a result of failures in working with clients), when they are exposed to verbal or physical aggression from clients, or if they fear losing their jobs. The strength of the stimulus causing the state of emotional tension and stress does not have to be real, it depends on subjective evaluation and individual coping resources (cf. Ogińska-Bulik, 2006; Zbyrad, 2009; Czechowska-Bieluga, 2013; Tarka, 2015).

The negative impact of various types of difficult situations in social work results in the stress experienced by employees. This stress is characterized by the overload of their nervous system and negative emotions, which disrupt the balance between the employees' resources, their ability to act effectively, and the demands placed on them at work (cf. Strelau, 2006, p. 152; Heszen, 2014, p. 24). So, their confidence in their ability to control events and appropriate behaviours, needed to successfully complete tasks, decrease (cf. Bubble, 2005, pp. 12–13). Self-efficacy is an important element of social workers' professional functioning and a condition for the quality of their support activities. Thus, self-efficacy can determine what actions social workers take and what goals they set for themselves, as well as their determination and persistence in achieving them and enduring the workload.

People with a high sense of self-efficacy are found to perceive difficult tasks as challenges that need to be taken up while being committed and setting goals themselves, and striving to achieve them. Failure or other setbacks do not lower this sense, as they believe they can control the environmental factors affecting

their behaviour because all they need to do is put more effort into changing the situation or acquire the missing knowledge and skills (cf. Kosciellak, 2010, pp. 62–63).

In contrast, people characterized by low self-efficacy show withdrawal from difficult tasks because these pose a personal threat, have low aspirations, and are reluctant to identify with their goals. When difficulties arise, instead of mobilizing their strength, they look for excuses, pointing to external obstacles or their incompetence (cf. Bandura, 2007; Lukasik, 2013).

Previous research results show that self-efficacy has a positive relationship with the ability to defer gratification, as well as with self-confidence and perseverance (Chomczynska-Rubacha, Rubacha, 2007). Self-efficacy determines more effective use of one's cognitive resources, accurate assessment of situations, and effective search for the ways to cope with difficult situations and the perceived burden of the workload (Lukasik, 2005).

Methodological assumptions

This empirical research explores the sense of workload among social workers in the context of their sense of self-efficacy. The goal was to determine the role of self-efficacy in explaining their perceived workload. The object and purpose of the research thus defined implied the following main research problem:

Is self-efficacy a predictor of the surveyed social workers' sense of workload and to what extent?

The following hypothetical assumption was made:

The surveyed social workers' sense of self-efficacy, representing their belief in their ability to control events, mobilize their cognitive potential and appropriate behaviours needed to successfully complete tasks, is a significant predictor of their perceived workload (cf. Bańka, 2005; Zientek, 2006; Lukasik, 2013).

Solving the research problem and verifying the working hypothesis first required diagnosing the social workers' sense of workload (the explained multicategorical variable). For this purpose, the Subjective Work Evaluation Questionnaire (SWEQ), developed by B. Dudek et al. (2004) was used. This tool addresses the issue of employees' protection from the effects of occupational stress and it was designed to measure employees' sense of occupational stress. It was used for both a general assessment of the sense of stress and an

assessment of the following factors: sense of psychological strain related to the complexity of work; lack of rewards at work; sense of insecurity caused by the organization of work; social contacts; sense of threat; physical annoyances; unpleasant working conditions; lack of control; lack of support; and sense of responsibility. The scale consists of 55 statements (items) describing various job characteristics. Next to each of them are numbers from 1 to 5, which indicate the degree to which this feature is bothersome, annoying, and stressful to the respondent. Number 1 means that the trait is not present in the job at all, and number 5 is the highest degree of annoyance. The index for measuring stress is the sum of all scores selected by the respondent. The higher it is, the greater the surveyed person's sense of stress is. The tool is widely used, often to study stress among the people functioning in social services (cf. M. Czechowska-Bieluga, 2013, p. 182).

The next step was to diagnose the level of the respondents' sense of self-efficacy (the explanatory variable). For this purpose, the Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES) was used. It is a tool containing 10 questions that fall under one factor. The GSES scale measures the strength of the respondent's general belief in the effectiveness of coping with difficult situations and obstacles. For each question, there are four answers to choose from 1 – no, 2 – rather not, 3 – rather yes, and 4 – yes. The sum of all scores gives a total self-efficacy index, which ranges from 10 to 40. The higher the score, the higher the sense of self-efficacy is.

The solution to the main research problem was obtained from the correlation of the diagnosed variables. The most appropriate statistical technique for the scales used here was the R-Spearman rank correlation test. Pearson's chi-square test and Mann-Whitney U test, as well as analysis of variance, were also used in the statistical analyses.

The empirical material was collected in 2023 in social welfare centres in the Lublin region. The study included 158 social workers, and 150 properly completed questionnaires were qualified for analysis. Social workers were employed in Municipal Social Welfare Centres (75.3%), Social Welfare Houses (16.0%), and Local Family Support Centres (8.7%). Women predominated among the respondents (80.7%). Men were a small group (19.3%). The group of respondents was diverse in terms of both age and seniority. There were 23.3% of the respondents up to 30 years of age, 40.0% between 31 and 40 years of age, 26.7% between 41 and 50 years of age, and 10.0% over 50 years of age.

On the other hand, considering seniority, the most numerous group consisted of respondents employed in social support for more than 10 years – 39.3% of the respondents. Social workers who had from 5 to 10 years of experience constituted 29.3% of the sample, from 1 to 5 years – 21.3%, and the youngest with up to one year of seniority accounted for 10.0%. More than two-thirds of the respondents (69.3%) worked in centres located in the city and 30.7% in rural areas.

Analysis and interpretation of research results

The workload of the social workers in the sample (the explained variable) was diagnosed using the Subjective Work Evaluation Questionnaire (B. Dudek et al., 1999). The overall level of this workload was determined and then the underlying factors were identified. Demographic and social factors were included as independent mediating variables in the conducted analyses.

The obtained data shows that the total score on the sten scale is 7.3, which indicates the high overall perceived workload among the social workers in the sample (1-4 sten low score, 5-6 sten average score, and 7-10 sten high score).

Data showed that more than two-thirds of the surveyed social workers (69.3%) felt the burden of their work to a high degree. For nearly one in five respondents (18.7%), the burden was average: they had some difficult and highly stressful tasks and other routine tasks that did not require too much effort and did not constitute a psychophysical burden. Only one in eight respondents (12.0%) believed that their work was not a particular burden for them, because they saw the performed tasks and duties as normal in social support work.

There was a statistically significant relationship between respondents' overall sense of workload and their workplace ($Z=2.389$; $p<0.017$). A greater sense of workload was reported by social workers employed in urban social welfare centres than by those working in other institutions.

From the structure of the factors constituting the source of workload for the social workers in the sample, it is clear that the most common sources of stress for them at work were a sense of insecurity caused by the organization of work ($M=2.54$), psychological strain ($M=2.46$), and a lack of rewards at work ($M=2.41$). This was followed by a sense of responsibility ($M=2.37$), social contacts ($M=2.31$), lack of control ($M=2.27$), and a sense of threat ($M=2.15$). The least frequently indicated as a source of stress were: unpleasant working

conditions ($M=1.98$), lack of support ($M=1.92$), or physical annoyances ($M=1.90$).

The obtained empirical data on sources of stress were interpreted based on norms developed for each factor separately defining them as low or highly stressful.

In the case of insecurity caused by the organization of work, a score of 15 points and above indicated the presence of a sense of uncertainty caused by how the work is organized, i.e. doing work in spurts, surprising employees with tasks, the need to switch to a new task without completing the previous one, haste and time pressure resulting from the obligation to complete tasks within deadlines, imposed work rhythm, or the need to reconcile conflicting interests. Among the social workers in the sample, nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the respondents (71.3%) reported high stress due to these organizational conditions. In contrast, more than one in four respondents (28.7%) felt no stress because of these conditions. The level of insecurity caused by work organization shows a significant statistical relationship with the seniority of the social workers ($F=3.192$; $p<0.044$). As the seniority and work experience of the respondents increased, so did their sense of burden caused by the time pressure, surprising them with tasks, and the constant change of priorities, as well as the imposed work rhythm and often unrealistic deadlines for completing the tasks.

A sense of mental workload among the respondents occurred if scores were above 17. In this condition, employees had a lot of tasks and a constant feeling of not performing them, as their scope was not adapted to their capabilities, so they experienced internal conflicts, they could not stop thinking about work, and they took work home, so work negatively affected their family life. Resulting high levels of stress were reported by as many as $\frac{3}{4}$ of the respondents (76.7%). Only one in four respondents (23.3%) had no problems with this. As it was found, more often women (78.5%) than men felt the psychological burden of their professional work to a high degree (Chi-square 4.894; $df=1$, $p<0.027$).

The lack of rewards at work was a stress factor if the test score was 14 or more. Rewards could be material: financial promotion, monetary rewards, and shopping bonuses, but also non-material: verbal and written praise, congratulatory letters, etc. Lack of these rewards or giving bonuses unfairly was a source of strongly felt stress for $\frac{3}{4}$ of the respondents (76.7%). In contrast, for one in five social workers (23.3%), rewards at work and the bonus system did not arouse such emotions and did not cause annoyance at being unappreciated.

The social workers' sense of responsibility in their support activities was an emotional burden for them if the obtained score was 8 points or more. This stressor was related to the awareness of material responsibility for one's decisions in a situation of frequent changes in regulations when it was easy to make mistakes. In addition, social workers reported a lack of feedback about their work and excessive interference by superiors in the detailed arrangements made by the employee. This situation highly stressed 2/3 of the respondents (68.0%), while for the remaining respondents (32.0%) it was not a problem. The level of sense of responsibility differentiated between seniority in the social work profession (Chi-square 9.041; $df=2$; $p<0.011$). The high burden caused by the sense of professional responsibility increased with seniority (up to 5 years – 51.1%, seniority from 5 to 10 years – 75.0%, and above 10 years – 76.3%).

Working as a social worker means constantly entering into various social relationships. Social interactions were highly stressful if the score was 9 or more. The obtained data showed that the need to work with other people (clients or co-workers), help others, and perform complex tasks strongly stressed as many as 84.7% of the respondents. Various difficult situations faced by clients and clients' aggression caused these negative emotions. Only 15.3% of the respondents did not feel this burden. Analyses showed that seniority differentiated the level of perceived burden caused by social contact (chi-square 8.033; $df=2$; $p<0.018$). A high burden related to entering various social relations was more often felt by senior employees (90.9%) than those with up to 5 years of seniority (72.3%).

In contrast, a lack of control was a source of stress for scores of 8 and more. Data showed that repetitive activities, a fixed hourly work regime, precisely designated breaks, constant vigilance, and a sense of lack of subjectivity were stress factors for 70.0% of the respondents. There were no unpleasant experiences related to the above stressors for 30.0% of the respondents.

A sense of insecurity was a source of severe stress for scores of 10 points and above. The obtained data showed that more than every second social worker in the sample (56.0%) was strongly stressed by availability requirements, as well as conflicts, misunderstandings, and aggression from the clients. The remaining respondents (44.0%) did not feel psychological discomfort because of this.

Unpleasant working conditions caused negative emotions and experiences among employees if the scores were 5 points and above. Data showed that strong stress caused by such conditions was experienced by every second

respondent (52.0%). The remaining respondents (48.0%) did not experience negative emotions caused by unpleasant working conditions.

In the absence of support, strong stress occurred if the score was 5 points and above. Two-thirds of the social workers (65.3%) reported feeling negative emotions due to work done alone, lack of support from colleagues, and in the case of absence, disruptions at work. One in three respondents (34.7%) had no problems with this.

Physical inconvenience in social work caused severe stress for employees if the scores were 8 points and above. The obtained data showed that more often one in two respondents (56.0%) did not feel negative emotions because physical working conditions were satisfactory. In contrast, for 44.0% of the respondents, conditions were unsatisfactory and aroused negative feelings.

In conclusion, work in the profession of a social worker was a heavy burden for most respondents and practically all analysed aspects of work were a source of stress to a greater or lesser extent. The main source was the sense of uncertainty caused by the organization of work, the sense of mental workload, and the lack of rewards at work.

The next step in the research procedure was to diagnose the self-efficacy of the social workers in the sample (the explanatory variable). To determine the sense of self-efficacy of the social workers, the Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale (GSES) was used (Juczynski, 2001, p.97). The general level of self-efficacy, when transformed into standardized units, was interpreted according to the properties of a sten scale. Scores within sten 1-4 are low, while scores within sten 7-10 are high. The rest are assumed to be average.

The results indicate that the social workers were diverse in terms of self-efficacy. Every second respondent (52.0%) expressed the belief that they could, on average, solve most of the problems related to their duties if they put in enough effort and showed initiative. In contrast, a high level of self-efficacy in various professional situations was manifested by more than one in four social workers (28.9%). In contrast, nearly one in five respondents (19.3%) stated that they were unlikely to meet all the challenges related to their professional role, as they were unable to cope, especially in new situations. They still had too little experience and skills. They were rather pessimistic about what would lay ahead and did not have much faith in their successful performance and professional success.

Statistical analyses revealed that the workplace in urban or rural areas significantly differentiated social workers' levels of self-efficacy. Social workers employed in urban social welfare centres showed a higher sense of self-efficacy than those employed in other support institutions ($Z=0.2389$; $p<0.017$).

Having diagnosed the studied variables, we verified the assumed relationship between the variables. The results of the R-Spearman rank correlation test are shown in Table 1.

Statistical analyses showed there was a significant relationship between the social workers' overall sense of workload and their sense of self-efficacy. This relationship was negative ($R=-0.266$; $p<0.001$). As the social workers' belief in their ability to control events that affect them and to motivate themselves to the appropriate behaviours needed to successfully achieve their goals increased, their sense of workload decreased. This is because they knew their strengths and were able to realistically assess the situation and effectively respond to the problems that occurred at work.

Sense of self-efficacy was found to correlate negatively with seven of the ten analysed sources of occupational stress for social workers. The relatively strongest correlation was found between the respondents' sense of self-efficacy and the sense of psychological strain associated with job complexity ($p<0.000$; $R=-0.302$), lack of social support ($p<0.000$; $R=-0.301$), and lack of control ($p<0.001$; $R=-0.281$). In conclusion, as self-efficacy increased among the surveyed employees, several stressors decreased: the burden caused by constantly thinking about work due to excess responsibilities, difficulty in completing tasks, not adjusting to the capabilities and pace of work, sense of not completing tasks, taking work home, and staying after hours to catch up which negatively affect family life. What also decreased significantly was criticism of not being able to count on help from co-workers or superiors and being on one's own. Respondents were also less likely to feel negative emotions and the resulting psychological burden of customer problems, working conditions, and the complexity of their tasks.

Table 1. Sense of workload versus self-efficacy among the social workers in the sample

Sense of workload among the social workers	Self-efficacy among the social workers	
	R	p
Workload – total score	-0.266	0.001
Sense of psychological strain related to work complexity	-0.302	0.000
Lack of rewards at work	-0.227	0.005
Sense of insecurity caused by work organization	-0.174	0.033
Social contacts	-0.209	0.010
Sense of threat	-0.208	0.011
Physical annoyances	-0.098	0.234
Unpleasant working conditions	-0.140	0.088
Lack of control	-0.281	0.001
Lack of support	-0.301	0.000
Sense of responsibility	-0.159	0.052

Source: Authors' own research.

Subsequent analyses showed a negative correlation between the social workers' sense of self-efficacy and the following sources of stress in their work: lack of rewards at work ($p < 0.005$; $R = -0.227$), social contacts ($p < 0.010$; $R = -0.209$), sense of threat ($p < 0.011$; $R = -0.208$) and sense of insecurity caused by work organization ($p < 0.005$; $r = -0.174$). The increased sense of self-efficacy among the social workers in the sample was accompanied by decreased stress caused by not being valued at work and being treated unfairly, and by lack of support from superiors. The social workers' sense of insecurity caused by not using their abilities and qualifications also decreased. As the respondents' feeling that they always achieve what they plan at work strengthened, they did not feel the difficulties arising from the need to be available, the occurrence of misunderstandings or conflicts, or the risk that they would make mistakes causing negative legal or material consequences. They did not worry if their work was organized smoothly or was done in spurts, if they were surprised with tasks to be done urgently, or had to switch from one task to another, function in an imposed work rhythm, and reconcile often conflicting interests.

In contrast, self-efficacy showed no relationship with the three factors that cause stress at work: physical annoyance, unpleasant working conditions, and sense of responsibility.

Conclusion

The results obtained in the present study indicate that more than two-thirds of the respondents are overburdened with their work, especially as a result of the insecurity caused by the organization of work, the psychological strain associated with the complexity of work, and the lack of satisfying remuneration. Changing regulations, increasingly demanding clients, low social and material status of the profession, and a sense of professional responsibility cause a lot of negative emotions and professional dissatisfaction for social workers. The results of the study confirm previous findings that social workers experience a high workload since their job requires high competence, experience, and personal resources to cope with stress (cf. Zbyrad, 2009; Zubrzycka-Maciąg, 2013; Czechowska-Bieluga 2013; Tarka, 2015, Wierzejska, 2018). Respondents in the sample report average levels of the important personal resource of self-efficacy which shows a significant negative relationship with the analysed factors constituting sources of stress at work. Thus, the greater the conviction of social workers is about their abilities to control the events that affect them, and their abilities to motivate themselves, to mobilize their personal resources to manifest the appropriate behaviours needed for effective action, the lower their sense of professional burden is in practically all its analysed dimensions related to their work (cf. Bańka, 2005). Therefore, it seems reasonable to undertake legislative changes to stabilize social workers' professional situation, increase the prestige of the profession, and ensure continuous professional improvement to strengthen personal resources, especially related to self-efficacy, sense of control, and coping with stress.

Abstract: Working in the support professions is associated with a heavy mental and emotional burden. Social workers face human tragedy, difficult situations, a shortage of resources, and the need to make extremely responsible decisions regarding people's fate, and they may even be exposed to aggression from demanding clients. These factors may cause unpleasant experiences and emotional tensions among social workers, disrupting the course and structure of professional activities. Self-efficacy may help in coping with this burden. It constitutes the belief that one has the skills allowing them to cope better with problems (cf. Zientek, 2006; Bandura, 2007; Wierzejska, 2018). The article aims, therefore, to determine the role of self-efficacy in explaining the perceived workload of social workers. The obtained research results indicate that social workers' self-efficacy is a significant predictor of their sense of workload.

Keywords: Social worker, workload, self-efficacy

Streszczenie: Praca w zawodach pomocowych wiąże się z dużym obciążeniem psychicznym i emocjonalnym. Pracownicy socjalni spotykają się z ludzką tragedią, sytuacjami trudnymi, deficytem środków, koniecznością podejmowania niezwykle odpowiedzialnych decyzji dotyczących ludzkich losów, niekiedy narażeni są nawet na agresję roszczeniowych klientów. Czynniki te mogą powodować przykre przeżycia i napięcia emocjonalne pracowników, zakłócać przebieg i strukturę wykonywanych czynności zawodowych. W radzeniu sobie z tym obciążeniem może pomagać poczucie własnej skuteczności stanowiąc przekonanie, o posiadaniu uzdolnień, które pozwalają lepiej radzić sobie z problemami (por. Zientek, 2006; Bandura, 2007; Wierzejska, 2018). Celem artykułu jest więc określenie roli poczucia własnej skuteczności w wyjaśnieniu odczuwanego obciążenia pracą pracowników socjalnych. Uzyskane wyniki badań wskazują, że poczucie własnej skuteczności pracowników socjalnych stanowi istotny predyktor ich poczucia obciążenia pracą.

Słowa kluczowe: Pracownik socjalny, obciążenie pracą, poczucie własnej skuteczności

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Date of the submission of article to the Editor: 19.11.2023

Date of acceptance of the article: 10.12.2023