

***Ivan Trajkov, PhD***

Faculty of Philosophy  
Department of Social Work and Social Protection  
Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje  
eleonora@isppi.ukim.edu.mk

***Eleonora Serafimovska, PhD***

Institute for sociological, political and juridical research, Skopje  
Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje  
eleonora@isppi.ukim.edu.mk

***Marijana Markovik, PhD***

Institute for sociological, political and juridical research, Skopje  
Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje  
marijana@isppi.ukim.edu.mk

**PROFESSIONAL STRESS IN SOCIAL  
WORKERS AND PSYCHOLOGISTS  
EMPLOYED IN THE FIELD OF SOCIAL  
CARE AND HEALTH**

Abstract

Professional stress of persons working in helping professions (social workers, psychologists) is insufficiently researched in our country, which reduces the possibility of taking measures to prevent occupational “burn out”. On the other hand, the significant socio-economic and political changes in the country have led to an increase in the number of people who face

social risks, which inevitably increased the workload of persons from helping professions. In order to establish the situation with professional stress in these occupations in a time span of ten years were carried out two identical surveys. Two instruments were used: list of general data and Scale for measuring professional stress (Weissman, 1996). The obtained data showed an increase in the number of professionals (social workers and psychologists) with high level of professional stress, risk of “burn out” as a result of the increased volume of work engagement. The results of this study could be used in planning future research but also as a basis for planning and preparing programs for rehabilitation and prevention of occupational stress in individuals working in helping professions.

**Keywords:** professional stress, burn out, helping professions, social risk

## INTRODUCTION

Stress is a term for the condition of the body in which people experience a threat to their own integrity. Professional stress is a specific type of stress which undermines the health and reduces performance results.

A significant number of studies are dealing with the issue of stress in certain professions: pilots, miners, firemen, surgeons, teachers and others. There are a small number of studies that deal with the issue of stress among helping professions like social workers and psychologists. Their work is also highly stressful because of working with people with deep traumas caused by social or health reasons. There is insufficient knowledge about these problems and reduction of the possibility of preventing problems from professional stress among representatives of these professions and as well as implementation of the program which will reduce professional stress. Because of these reasons, it is justified to contribute to the expansion of the knowledge about professional stress among these two groups.

In this line, ten years ago, the research on professional stress among social workers and psychologists in the area of social protection and health was conducted. The results showed existence of a high level of professional stress among respondents from both groups but significantly higher levels of occupational stress was found among social workers in both areas.

The period of 10 years during which the country experienced substantial socio-economic changes, crises and security problems, the decline in standard and increased poverty, led to an increase in the number of people under social risk with health problems. Bearing this in mind, the survey aimed to examine whether these changes led to an increase the number of professionals with a high level of professional stress, risk of burn out, was conducted (Trajkov, 2004).

The objective of this research is to check: Is social-economic problems, the drastic decline in living standards, growing poverty, the emergence of state security problems, and other crises that increased the number of people at social risk and people with health problems have led to an increase in the number professionals (social workers and psychologists) with a high level of professional stress, risk of burn out is the subject of this research.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

There are several definitions of professional stress. According to one “professional stress is a physical and emotional response that occurs when the job requirements exceed the capabilities, resources or needs of the worker.” (US National Institute

of Occupational Safety and Health, 1999). Professional burn out is a syndrome of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion and negative attitudes toward work, in response to the personality of chronic stress. Research on stress among professional social workers in the world suggest that stress is consistently present among the members of this profession (Jones, 2001), that the social worker profession is one of the most stressful professions (Travers and Cooper, 1993; Kahn, 1993), the stress of working in this profession is rapidly expanding (Coffey, Dugdill and Tattersall, 2004).

Professional stress, or in the literature known as “burnout” is a complex phenomenon, which is defined as a syndrome of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion and negative attitudes toward work, as the response of the personality to chronic stress.

In the early eighties of the last century professional stress and professional burn out became current terms in describing the psychological condition of the employees in human resources especially in helping services for individuals, families and communities at risk. Empirical evidence consistently indicates that the occurrence of stress characteristic especially for helping professions such as: doctors, counselors in social protection services, social workers, psychologists, counselors and therapists in mental health centers. Those professions are particularly vulnerable to the accumulation of professional stress and later occurrence of burn out syndrome.

The work of social workers is undoubtedly one of more stressful job between helping professions. The target groups of social care users are: clients, families, groups in crises, e.g. those whose personalities and social environment has already been characterized by varying degrees of risk. Daily interaction with clients / patients, time pressure, reduced resources, extended working hours and reduced income from work after a certain time, individual predisposition, can lead to numerous stressful reactions and professional burn out.

In the former republics of Yugoslavia interest in stress research increased during the period of military conflicts (Zuzul and Raboteg-Saric, 1992), (Ljubotina, D. O., 1996; Ajduković, Ajdukovic and Ljubotina, 1997).

One of the research on stress and burning out among social workers employed at the Center for Social Work in Zagreb (Friscic, 2007) showed that 11.5% of social workers showed a high degree of stress syndrome or burn out; 45.2% of social workers showed initial signs of burn out as an indicator of permanent exposure to stress, while 43.3% of social workers showed no presence of burn out among them isolated signs of stress were present (p.24).

The mentioned research identified seven factors of stress at work among social workers:

1. The feeling of exposure and uncertainty in the workplace;
2. Insecurity in their own competences;
3. The limits of working place in terms of progression;
4. Organization of work;
5. Physical conditions of work;
6. The limited cooperation between the institutions;
7. Unspecific reasons.

One of the frequent and severe consequences of professional stress, which is the basis for the emergence of all previously listed consequences is “burnout” phenomenon.

The Panic’s research (2011) in which one of the research problem was determining the differences in burnout for employees of the Ministry of Interior, professional firefighters and social workers. It was detected that the responses of the social workers on the questionnaire which measure the intensity of burnout shown higher score ( $M = 27.2$ ) compared to the  $M$  of employees in Ministry of Interior ( $M = 25.5$ ) and professional firefighters ( $M = 23.7$ ).

Corcoran (1989) examined the relationship between empathy and burnout among social workers and found out that empathy is related with burnout syndrome when there is lack of emotional distance.

In our country this problem does have enough attention neither by the researchers, which is why research into these problems here are rare. Especially it is case with research on professional stress among helping professionals: social workers and psychologists employed in the areas of social protection and health. Study entitled as: “Professional stress in helping professions - consequences thereof” was conducted in 2005 with main goal to determine the intensity of stress at the workplace and the emergence of professional burnout among different professions: social workers, psychologists, special education teachers and teachers employed in the Center for Social Work, the Centre for Mental Health and Psychiatric Hospital Skopje - Skopje. Analysis of the results showed: a high level of professional stress in 70% of the respondents and the initial phase of burnout in about 30%. These results confirmed the assumption that professional helpers are group at high risk of occupational stress and hereby the need for mental health programs for helping professional are absolutely important (Trajkov, 2005: 487).

## PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVE OF THE RESEARCH

Problem of the research is whether there are differences in the level of professional stress and burnout among social workers and psychologists employed

in social care and health ten years ago and the social workers and psychologists employed in the same areas today, in which group of professionals and in which aspect there are differences.

Concretization of the problem emerged following questions:

- Are there significant differences in the level of professional stress among respondents<sup>1</sup> from the first sample and the second sample of respondents from different profession (social workers and psychologists) employed in the same area?
- Are there significant differences in the level of professional stress among respondents from the first sample and the second sample from the same profession employed in different fields and respondents from different profession employed in the same area?
- Are there significant differences between respondents from the first sample and the second sample of respondents in the number of professionals with burnout syndrome?

Objective: Determining the differences in the level of professional stress and the occurrence of combustion among respondents from the first and second sample<sup>2</sup> (social workers and psychologists) employed in the areas social protection and health.

## Indicators

Key indicators to assess the professional stress and burnout:

- scores on the test which measure the intensity of stress at the workplace;
- length of employment of respondents who works with persons under the social and / or health risk;
- number of professionals who attended programs for the prevention of mental health and stress management;
- number of professionals who need education to help prevent stress and professional burnout.

## Assumptions

In this research the following assumptions will be challenged:

---

1 Hereinafter to denote the first survey respondents we will use the term “respondents from the first sample,” and for the present study respondents we will use the term “respondents from the second sample”

2 With term “respondents from the first sample” results of respondents from the previous survey were marked, and with “respondents from the second sample” results of respondents from this survey were marked.

- As the consequence of increased socio-economic problems in the past ten years and increased number of people with social and health problems (clients / patients), the increased workload will lead to the emergence of professional stress and burnout syndrome among greater number of professionals from the second sample in both groups and will lead to significant differences in the level of professional stress among respondents from the first and second sample.
- Emergence of significant differences in the level of professional stress among respondents of different profession (social workers and psychologists) from the first sample and the second sample employed in the same area.
- Emergence of significant differences in the level of professional stress among respondents from the same profession in the first and second sample employed in a different area;
- Emergence of significant differences among the participants from the first sample and the second sample in the number of professionals with the syndrome of burnout.

## **Method**

This survey is a repetition of a survey conducted ten years ago<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, we use the same methodology and sample which according the number, profession and areas of work is the same with the previous survey.

### *Respondents*

The survey used a stratified sample consisted of 60 respondents selected according to the following criteria:

- Profession: Social worker and psychologist
- Region: Social Protection and Health
- institution in which it operates: Center for Social Work in Skopje and Centers for Social work in 3 cities; institutions for social protection; Mental health centers; Mental health services - Skopje; Psychiatric hospitals in Skopje, Demir Hisar and Negorci;
- Work of experience in the institution: over 5 years

According to these criteria two groups of respondents were selected:

The first group of 30 participants is social care staff from Centers for social work and social protection institutions.

---

3 Трајков И (2004) Професионален стрес кај социјални работници и психолози вработени во областа на социјална заштита и здравство (Professional stress at social workers and psychologists employee in social care and health) Магистерски труд, Филзофски факултет, Скопје. (Master's thesis, Faculty of Philosophy, Skopje)

According to the criteria - profession- sample of respondents from social protection consisted up of 20 social workers and 10 psychologists.

The second group consists of 30 subjects in the field of health employees: mental health centers and psychiatric hospitals;

According to the criteria - a profession -sample of respondents from second group had 20 social workers and 10 psychologists.

The total sample had 60 respondents: 40 social workers and 20 psychologists.

According to the criterion “work experience in the institution” sample had 12 respondents with working experience from 5 to 10 years; 48 participants with working experience in the institution longer than 10 years. 17 Psychologists (7 from Health area and 10 from social protection area).

The number of respondents from two professions is different because the number of psychologists employed in these two areas is less than the number of social workers.

#### *Research tools and techniques*

- List of general information.

This questionnaire was constructed for the research in the first survey and was used in the same research now. It intended to collect data for the general characteristics of the sample. It contains 15 questions.

- SPS - Scale for measuring professional stress (Weissman, 1996)

This test measures the intensity of stress at workplace and the risk of professional burnout. The test contains 15 items. Responses was gain on five-grade scale (strongly agree; agree; neutral; disagree; totally disagree). The maximum score is 60. Scores were grouped into 4 categories.

#### *Statistical Methods*

Input data is done with SPSS. Statistical analysis was based on: Descriptive analysis: Mean - M of the groups; ANOVA analysis of variance (ANOVA), statistically significant differences between arithmetic means in different groups.

## **Results**

Survey of professional stress and burnout syndrome among social workers and psychologists were examined through verification of the assumptions set and for research of occurrence we used the results of the scale for measurement of professional stress (Weissman)

The results of the respondents obtained in this test will show:



- Are there differences in the number of respondents with professional stress and symptoms of burnout among the participants of the first and second sample?
- Are there differences in the number of respondents with professional stress and the risk of burnout (level 3). between professionals of the same profession in the first and second sample employed in a different field?
- Are there differences in the number of respondents with professional stress and symptoms of burnout (level4) between professionals of the same profession employed in a different area?

**Table 1.** *Level of professional stress and burnout syndrome among respondents from the first and second test in both professional groups in both areas*

Area / profession	Level of professional stress –first group									
	1		2		3		4		Sum	
	No %	No %	No %	No %	No %	No %	No %	No %	No %	
Social workers in social care		9	22.50	9	22.50	2	5.00	20	50,0	
Social workers in health		9	22.50	10	25.00	1	2.50	20	50,0	
Total: Social Workers		18	45,00	19	47.50	3	7.50	40	100	
Psychologists in social protection		6	30.00	4	20.00	0		10	50.0	
Psychologists in Health		7	35,00	3	15,00	0		10	50,0	
Total: psychologists		13	65.00	7	35.00	0		20	100	
A total of two groups		31	51.67	26	43.33	3	5,00	60	100	

Area / profession	Level of professional stress –second group									
	1		2		3		4		Sum	
	No %	No %	No %	No %	No %	No %	No %	No %	No %	
Social workers in social care		6	15,00	11	27,50	3	7,50	20	50.00	
Social workers in health		5	12,5	12	30,00	3	7.50	20	50.00	
Total: Social Workers		11	27,50	23	57,50	6	15,00	40	100,00	
Psychologists in social protection		5	25,00	4	20.00	1	5,00	10	50,0	
Psychologists in Health		4	20,00	6	30,00	0		10	50,0	
Total: psychologists		9	45,00	10	50,00	1	5,00	20	100	
A total of two groups		20	33,33	33	55,00	7	11,66	60	100	

Analysis of the results in Table 1 show:

- In category - level 1 in both samples there is no respondents;
- Among 31 respondents (51.67%) from the first sample and among 20 respondents (33.33%) of the second sample professional stress level 2 was diagnosed, i.e., risk of burnout (urgent appeal for prevention of burnout);
- 26 respondents (43.33%) from the first sample and 33 respondents (55.00%) of the second sample were diagnosed with professional stress level 3, i.e., the initial phase of professional burnout;
- 3 respondents (5%) of the first sample and 7 respondents (11.66%) of the second sample was diagnosed with professional stress level 4, i.e. burnout.

Most respondents with professional stress and initial burnout in the second sample (33) according to (26) in the first sample, leads to the question whether the difference between these two examples is important?

**Table 2.** *Significance of differences in the number of respondents with professional stress and beginning of burnout between the first and second sample (Level 3)*

Occupation	Level III	M	$\sigma$	t	P
I sample: Social workers / psychologists	26	43,33	1,62	-29,660	p<0,05
II sample: Social workers / psychologists	33	55,00	2,12		

The data in Table 2 show: there is significant difference in the level of professional stress and beginning of burnout among respondents between the first and second sample. Respondents from the second sample have a higher level of professional stress. Difference is significant at 0.05 level.

**Table 3.** *Significance of differences in the number of respondents with professional burnout respondents between the first and second sample (level 4)*

Occupation	Level III	M	$\sigma$	t	P
I sample: Social workers / psychologists	3	5,00	2,32	-5,797	P<0,01
II sample: Social workers / psychologists	7	11,66	1,24		

The data shown in Table 3 present: There is a significant difference in the number of respondents in the fourth level of professional stress - professional burnout among respondents from the first and second sample. Burnout syndrome is significantly more common among respondents of the second sample. Difference level is 0.05.

The results of both tables have confirmed the basic assumption and demonstrated that in the last ten years number of professionals with professional stress and burn out has increased among members of these two helping professions - employed in the areas social protection and health.

## CONCLUSION

Many researchers the susceptibility on stress and burnout syndrome of professionals working helping professions are emphasizing as especially stressful the work of the social workers. Among them (Jones, 2001; Travers and Cooper, 1993; Kahn, 1993; Frishchikj, 2007) are claiming that the profession social worker is one of the most stressful professions. Our knowledge that occupational stress of social workers is continually increasing, is confirmed with the results of the research.

The risk of working with clients with social, psychological and health connected problems leads to development of high level of occupational stress in social workers and psychologists. From the conducted research is demonstrated that social workers are facing higher level of occupational stress in comparison to the psychologists.

Basic factors for increased stress risks and occupational stress at these professionals are: risk of working with individuals, groups and families under risk (social, psychological and health) need and problems; specifics of the profession; personal characteristics and long term exposure on risk.

The reasons for differences in the risk and the level of professional stress between psychologists and social workers are:

- Specific needs of the professions, the type of the services and the way of providing the service
- How professionals are dealing with their personal problems;
- Training for prevention.

The results of this research can be used for planning of future researches and as base for stress prevention. Higher result of this research is that can be suggested recommendations for decreasing the risks of occupational stress.

- Sensitization for the existence of serious problem and decreasing the efficiency of the professionals

- Development of long term preventive-educational program
- Ongoing training through supervision for helping and supporting the professionals
- Developing of self help skills
- Using relaxation techniques

Implementation of these recommendations and strategies, especially in the part of continued education and supervision of professional psychologists and social workers working in the areas of health and social protection, are basic elements for prevention.

### **References**

Ajduković M, Ajduković D, Ljubotina, D. (1997.) Mental health care for helpers: A necessary ingredient of trauma recovery training and assistance in war zones. U *D. Ajduković (ur.)*, Trauma Recovery Training: Lessons Learned, (str. 210-216). Zagreb: Društvo za psihološku pomoć.

Coffey M, Dugdill I and Tattersall A (2004) Stress in social services: Mental well-being, constraints and job satisfaction. *British Journal of Social Work* 34 (5): 735-747.

Coffey M, Dugdill I and Tattersall A (2009) Working in the public sector: A case study of social services. *Journal of Social Work* 9 (4): 420-442.

Družić Lj and Friščić L (2014) *Profesionalni stres kod socijalnih radnika: izvori stresa i sagorevanja na poslu*. Studijski centar socijalnog rada. Pravni fakultet u Zagrebu.

Friščić L (2006) Čimbenici profesionalnog stresa i sagorevanja u radu socijalnih radnika u centru za socijalnu skrb Zagreb. *Ljetopis Studijskog centra socijalnog rada* 13 (2): 347-370.

Johnson M and Stone GL (1987) Social workers and burnout: A psycho-logical description. *Journal of Social Service Research* 10: 67-80.

Jones C (2001) Voices from the front line: State social workers and New Labour. *British Journal of Social Work* 31 (4): 547-63.

Ljubotina, D. O. (2013). Siromaštvo kao izazov za socijalni rad u kontekstu ekonomske krize u Hrvatskoj. *Ljetopis socijalnog rada*, 20 (1), 187-204

Travers CJ and Cooper CL (1993) Mental health, job satisfaction and occupational stress among UK teachers. *Work and Stress* 7 (3): 203-219.

US National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health –NIOSH (1999) Stress at work. Cincinnati.

Weissman, M, D Sholomskas, M Pottenger, BA Prusoff, BZ Locke (1996) .Assessing depressive symptoms in five psychiatric populations: A validation study. *American Journal of Epidemiology*.106: 203-214

Žužul, M. i Raboteg-Šarić, Z.(1992.). Ratni stres u djece, “Velebit-Velegraf”, Zagreb

\*\*\*

Трајков И (2004) Професионален стрес кај социјални работници и психолози вработени во областа на социјална заштита и здравство (Professional stress at social workers and psychologists employee in social care and health) Магистерски труд, Филзофски факултет, Скопје. (Master’s thesis, Faculty of Philosophy, Skopje)

Трајков И (2005) Професионален стрес кај помагателните професии – последици од истиот. (Professional stress at helpful professions and consequences) Филозофски Факултет. Годишен Зборник 58: 475-491.(Faculty of Philosophy, Yearbook, 58: 475-491)

