

PROFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON RESILIENCE IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Abstract: *Social work is a profession that addresses social problems in society and aims to promote changes that facilitate optimal frameworks for the development of disadvantaged categories and equally promote the healthy development of human relationships. Exercising the profession constituted a permanent challenge due to the professional's daily contact with adversity, in various forms: abandonment, poverty, disabilities, losses, inequalities, etc. We aim to explore the perception of social workers in different social services at community level with consideration of the difficulties of the profession and resilience as a core feature in client practice. 4 in-depth interviews were conducted and 80 social workers from special and primary services responded to a questionnaire on resilience indicators. The results confirm other specialized studies that emphasize that resilience is a specific trait of the social worker (Wolin, 2004; Benard, 1991; Grant, & Kinman, 2012) and address the inherent nature of the profession. Study participants identified several manifestations of resilience, or compartments of it, that enable them to remain or perform better in an environment marked by suffering. A positive self-concept and a strong sense of identity, openness to experience, sense of humor, etc. We conclude that social workers are consciously involved in this process of generating change for the better; however, signals could be observed indicating the need to care for and maintain a healthy organizational climate to prevent occupational risks such as burnout, compassion fatigue.*

Key words: *social work: profession; resilience; adversity.*

The professional nature of social work and resilience

The topic of the resilience of social workers has been a subject of particular interest in the academic literature in recent decades; properly speaking, resilience was included as a profile subject in the education of social workers (Collins, 2017). Indeed, in the practice of social assistance, specialists meet daily with deficiency, losses, lacks or

suffering; this fact definitely leads to stress and trains various resources, such as: resistance to stress, a robust psychic structure, a high level of optimism and a cheerful and open, to experience temperament. Much has been written about the burnout of social workers (Kinman and Grant, 2011; Gómez-García, Alonso-Sangregorio, Llamazares-Sánchez, 2020; Barck-Holst, et al., 2021); including that this would be the reason why this professional category only stays in the profession for around 8 years in comparison with other professions that are practiced under conditions of adversity (Curtis, Moriarty and Netten, 2010). The constant contact with the victims of the abuse of abandoned children, with people who are alone or who are experiencing major losses, deaths, etc., gives the practice a reputation of being a difficult profession. Several professional risks have been identified, including burnout (Maslach, Leiter, Schaufeli, 2008; Williams, 2015), secondary traumatic stress (Wagaman et al., 2015), compassion fatigue (Adams, Boscarino, Figley, 2006), which seriously affects the state for the welfare of social workers.

As a result of this fact, Vîrgă, et al., (2020) draws attention to the need to care for and maintain a healthy organizational climate, especially in social assistance where the employees themselves provide care and protection. Despite all the adversities they come into contact with, it seems that social workers express significant satisfaction regarding the impact they have on people (Wendt, Tuckey and Prosser, 2011). In these conditions, the resilience of social workers appears as an extremely valuable trait, which makes it possible not only to survive but to exercise the profession with enthusiasm (Wendt et al., 2011). Resilience refers to an ability to return or recover after a period of difficulties, adversity or after stress-causing events, without affecting the mental health. Bonanno et al., (2004) catalogs it as the quality of rare and exceptionally healthy individuals; we can say that it is the key ingredient for the survival of the human species, especially if we consider the multiple pressures that we all experience every day. However, Collins (2017) criticizes the frequent association of resilience with social assistance, emphasizing in this way the intervention of the individual worker at the expense of forming a more extensive vision, such as that of the structural context of social assistance. Other authors are interested in understanding the nature of resilience; Grant, Kinman, (2012) believes that the predictors of this important quality consist of the high level of social trust and empathy and capacity for reflection. The table below contains a synthesis of the relevant academic literature on the nature or resources of resilience.

Table no. 1. *Synthesizing resilience resources from specialized literature*

Resilience indicators	Specific behaviors	Specialized literature correspondent
Resistent traits	A mix of personal traits and protection factors which are identified to determine a good mental health	Werner and Smith, 1982 Werner, 1989
Sense of humor, sense of direction and mission	Engaging in coping strategies such as minimizing or rationalizing	Garmezy, 1981
Intellectual capacity, adaptive distancing	Perception of reality mediated by intellectual capacity, identifying solutions	Jordan, 1992
The possession of a talent or an ability	Focusing on a hobby, talent or skill leads to healthy distancing from the source of trauma and develops creativity	Wolin & Wolin, 1993; Werner & Smith, 1982, Garmezy, 1991; Rutter, 1989; Werner, 1989; Luthar & Zigler, 1991; Kumpfer, 1993; Anthony, 1987; Wallerstein, 1983
Self-efficacy	Self-esteem is a component is the belief that one is competent to perform certain tasks	Bandura, 1977 Werner (1985)
Constant relationships with positive adults	Belief that one is in control of one's destiny—that misfortunes will be resolved and the odds can be overcome. talent, skills or a strong interest can help build resilience.	Benard, 1991

Source: Turner, S. G. (2001), <https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.176>

2.1. Research description

The topic we addressed, namely, the investigation of the perception of social workers regarding resilience required the development and carrying out of a mixed type of research, in which we applied a questionnaire and applied 4 interviews with social workers from different fields of activity.

2.2. Aim

Description of the professional setting of social assistance, as a setting marked by adversity that demands the high emotional and social skills of social workers.

2.3. Objectives

- ✚ Exploring social workers' perceptions of behaviors associated with resilience and describing the profile of social workers considered resilient.
- ✚ Identifying the perceptions of social workers in the field of child protection and other fields of activity regarding resilience indicators
- ✚ The description of the attitude, the way of reporting to the adversities specific to the practice of social assistance

2.4. Hypothesis and sample

1. Specialists in the field of social assistance are aware of the demanding nature of the profession, which calls for the constant mobilization of resilience as a personality trait
2. There are services that train this trait more frequently and intensively
3. The indicators of resilience are perceived differently depending on the individual resources and mechanisms of the social workers to resist adversities

The structured questionnaire was applied to a number of 40 social workers in the field of child protection (specialized services) and 40 social workers working in primary or administrative services (from SPAS, DAS).

The study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the services that generate the greatest sources of stress or that train the resilience of social workers?
2. What are the resources that you activate most frequently in situations of stress and adversity?

The socio-demographic structure of the sample is displayed below:

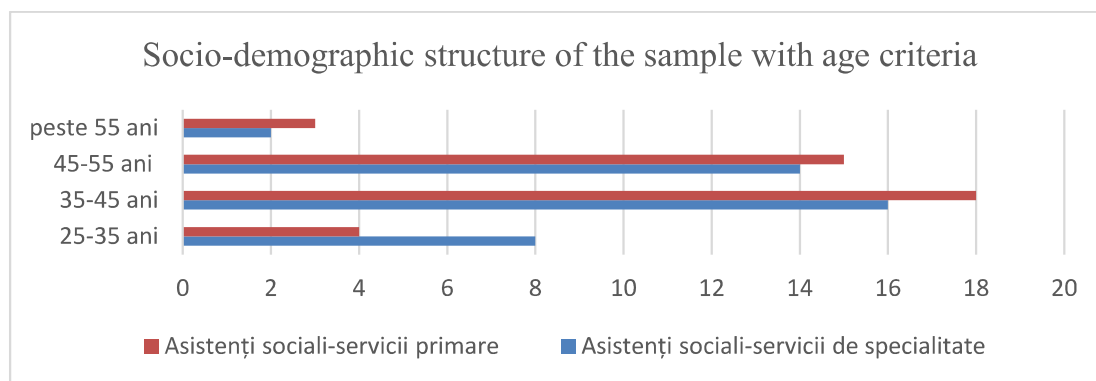


Figure no 1. The socio-demographic structure of the sample by age category

2.5. Methods

Field survey based on questionnaire constituted the research method used in the present study. The questionnaire was applied in child protection services and primary social assistance services, two areas

that require somewhat different professional skills. 4 interviews were also carried out, which aimed to evaluate respondents' perceptions of the behavioral indicators of a resilient person and the concepts that describe the most important challenges they face in child protection services.

2.6. Results

Respondents emphasized that resilience is a skill that is trained every day. The conducted interviews revealed exceptional qualities of the participants who speak with passion and enthusiasm about the profession they practice. I can easily list the disadvantages of doing social assistance, bringing serious and pertinent criticisms to the blockages in the social assistance profession, but the representation they have about their professional meaning is one to be admired, almost heroic. There must be people like us, really concerned with changing the defective things and their impact on people (ID. 20 years of experience in child protection).

Making a synthesis of the answers obtained, we list the following dysfunctions that make social assistance practice difficult:

- ✚ Helplessness in cases of abandonment/renunciation of one's own child
- ✚ Lack of resources in managing serious cases
- ✚ Weak legislation in cases of abuse and neglect / limited interventions
- ✚ Overcrowding with difficult cases

The participants repeated in unison the need to institute more drastic measures that could limit the effects of increasingly accentuated social problems and the creation of a realistic plan to prevent marginalization and limit social inequalities. The 4 conducted interviews revealed some personality characteristics of the social workers. Emotional resilience is not only a quality of the individual, but a dynamic resulting from the interaction between personal characteristics and external factors. Respondents are of the opinion that upon entering the child protection system as specialists they had limited resources to deal with the stress and trauma they came into contact with. They also noticed this in new entrants to the system, in graduates of social assistance programs. This study shows that social workers who are more resilient are those who can maintain positive relationships in their personal and professional lives, access support from a range of sources, demonstrate appropriate empathy, draw on a range of coping styles and successfully manage and contain their own and others' emotions. This is not to say that resilient social workers are superhuman and free from life's difficulties. They face the same problems as others, but tend to deal with setbacks constructively and

persevere in the face of difficulties.

The 4 cases also experienced negative feelings such as frustration, anger and anxiety, but balance them with positive experiences and reconsider the adverse reality. According to the analysis, experiences and emotions expand and build personal resources rather than depleting them, thus leading to resistance. Resilience is also self-sustaining: for example, flexibility and self-compassion contributed to the development of other skills and resources.

Interview 1.

A.S., 48 years old, child care protection system employee, 20 years of expertise

The participant points out that the constant exposure to traumatic situations initially constituted "a touchstone", a huge challenge that he faced. The enthusiasm at the beginning turned over time into overcrowding, burdening, loss of resistance. It describes the environment as one marked by permanent suffering, loss, unmet needs. Even though every day demands and trains new and new availability and skills, even though she feels that her resilience has decreased, there was never a moment in the acre that she wanted to give up.

"Choose a job you love and you'll never have to work a day in your life." – Confucius. A career in social work is a gift in that you are allowed to enter the intimate lives of wonderful people in your efforts to help them on their journey of recovery, where victims become survivors and systems bend to meet the needs of those more vulnerable people in our society.

I'm a qualified social worker and I work 50 hours a week and I still don't get it all done. The work never ends. I work from home on weekends constantly. I need to know that the work I do has an impact on people's lives. I don't have to wonder if my efforts made a difference. I see them every day in the lives of the people I work with" (A. S., 48 years old).

Interview 2.

The interview applied to C.S. case manager, 36 years old, revealed some truths-axioms regarding the specifics of the social worker profession. The respondent has the capacity for analysis and synthesis, coordination and collaboration. He integrates previous experiences but manages to look at each case from 0. He has built step by step resistance to stress and the huge soul losses with which he works and with which he is in constant contact, he self-evaluates as successfully achieving the quality standards required for the position on who occupies it. Experienced social workers involved in the present study readily share feelings of pressure and large or complex cases. A few of

their observations have been selected with their permission:

I chose Social Work because I have always believed in the fight for human rights. I believe our profession can change the world on so many levels: for each person we have the opportunity to serve, for entire family systems, and for the communities in which we live. I am grateful for the opportunity to be part of a profession that reaches out to our most vulnerable populations and strives to make a difference in so many lives. The social work profession gives me the opportunity to work in a variety of settings and to work for multidimensional collaborative change. Working in this field, I am able to empower, support, motivate, connect and encourage resilience. To challenge stereotypes and avoid errors. Also, the fight against discrimination, oppression and injustice in any form. In this field, I get to be a voice for all those who cannot stand up for themselves. It's worth making this world a better place one person at a time.

Interview 3

Respondent L.B. (50 years old), at the time of the interview, declares himself overwhelmed and assaulted by constantly changing tasks due to the unpredictability and complexity of the cases. The number of beneficiaries is constantly increasing, their needs are diversifying, the respondent emphasizes the existence of a continuous internal struggle determined by the desire to produce change and limited resources on the one hand, and the deficient legal instruments they sometimes have at hand.

I am in Social Work because the profession gives me the opportunity to help people from a multitude of situations. It is my natural aptitude; I need to shine in this field to be myself. I had periods when I thought I couldn't do it anymore. I mounted quickly and took it from the end. Social work teaches me to respect vulnerability, relationship, the person's right to choose, their suffering, their resources and the responsibility we have in providing quality care.

Interview 4.

E.S., 47, says her resilience was tested very early on due to the loss of her mother and the difficult path in the special protection system. He chose the profession of social worker from the first years of high school out of a desire to save other lives. After 25 years of activity with abandoned children, E.S. he feels he needs to reorient himself professionally. His personal life is full of suffering; he appreciates that he does not have the necessary resources to counter the adversities at work.

I had a rough childhood and I wanted to help children so they wouldn't have to go through the pain and anguish I had to go through myself.

"I will be leaving soon because the stress and pressure is too much. I need to meet healthy and strong people; I don't have the resources to raise them myself.

Results

The interviews highlighted and confirmed what the literature has found about resilience factors. The life path of each respondent, personality traits, age and experience are particularly important indicators for outlining the potential for resistance to stress, trauma specific to the practice of social assistance.

In the table below we have summarized the concepts that describe the practice of social work, according to the social workers involved in the study, and that define the adversities they face on a daily basis. According to them, these adversities fundamentally train and demand all their emotional and cognitive resources.

Specialty services	Concepts associated with services practice
Adoption service - post-adoption department	Contact with the child who experienced abandonment, abuse; Difficult route marked by serial abandonment
The complex child assessment service	Disability, powerlessness, limitation, abandonment, loss trauma
Complex assessment service for adults with disabilities	Loss, deficiency, disability
The Service for the Prevention of Social Marginalization, Trafficking, Migration and Repatriation	Separation, loneliness, suffering, abandonment, trafficking, kidnapping, abandonment
	Abuse, neglect, abandonment, murder, extremes, rape, incest, contempt, hatred, risk, vulnerability
Case management service for children in individual/family foster care	Abuse, neglect, abandonment, murder, extreme limits, rape, incest, contempt, hatred, risk, vulnerability, Disability, helplessness, limitation, abandonment, loss trauma

Table no. 2. *Concepts associated with the practice in the field of child protection services*

The analysis of the results indicates quite different perceptions of the social workers included in the two categories: specialized services and primary services. The applied questionnaire sought to evaluate the perception of social workers regarding the organization on a scale of the most important behaviors specific to resilience. The results transposed in the figure below show that:

A positive self-concept and a strong sense of identity constitute the main resource in the fight against adversities, followed by enthusiasm, optimism and hope (categorized as fundamental conditions in exercising the profession of social worker). For child protection respondents, the ability to learn from experience and to approach reality with a sense of humor are extremely important. For specialists from other fields (who work predominantly in the office, with the classification of documents and files, the relationship with the client, where qualities such as organization, discipline, routine are required) resilience is rather associated with well-developed social skills and social trust, the ability to call on sources of support and set fair boundaries.

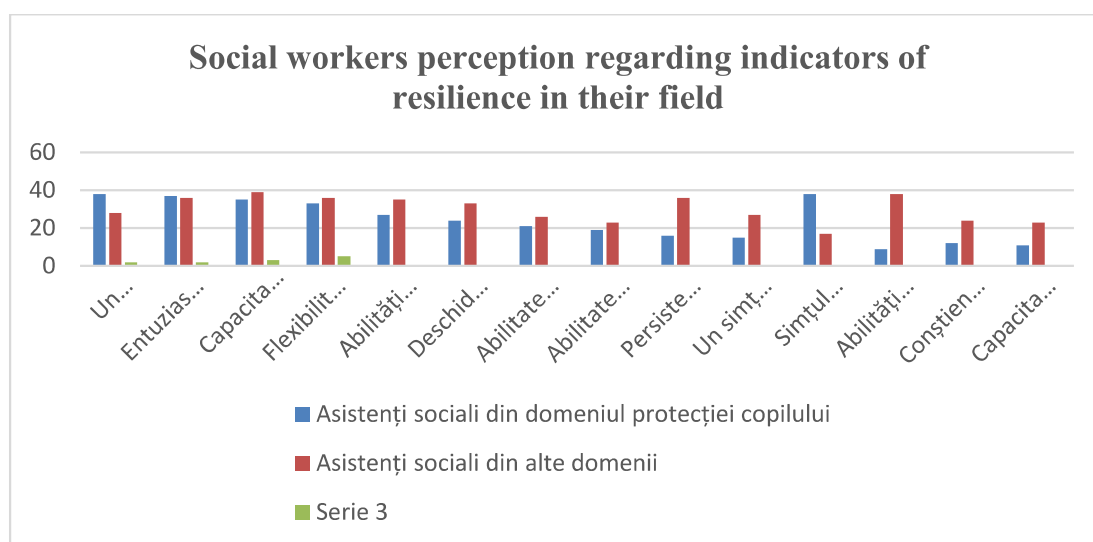


Figure no. 2. Social workers' perception of indicators of resilience in the social work profession

In the perception of social workers, study participants, resilience is represented by different behaviors, such as those listed below.

- ✚ A positive self-concept and a strong sense of identity.
- ✚ Flexibility and adaptability, drawing on a wide range of coping strategies and creative problem-solving skills
- ✚ Enthusiasm, optimism and hope
- ✚ The ability to learn from experience
- ✚ Well-developed social skills and social confidence
- ✚ Openness to experience
- ✚ Sense of humor
- ✚ Ability to identify and call on sources of support
- ✚ An internal locus of control (where an individual attributes their success to their own efforts and abilities) and a high degree of autonomy
- ✚ Self-awareness and emotional literacy.

- ✚ Self-compassion and the ability to prioritize self-care.
- ✚ Critical thinking skills.
- ✚ Ability to set appropriate boundaries.
- ✚ The ability to recognize and rely on one's own unique internal model and external resources.
- ✚ Persistence in the face of challenges, setbacks and adversity.
- ✚ A sense of purpose and the ability to derive from difficulties and challenges.
- ✚ Future orientation.
- ✚ Sense of humor.

The results indicate different perceptions, and the differences are determined by the different specificities of the activities in the two sectors of activity.

Conclusions

A professional social worker-client relationship that fosters reciprocity and creates solidarity and a sense of connectedness can be the vehicle to transform casualties and deficits into victories and resilience (Phillips, 1994; Jordan, 1992, 1998). Wolin and Wolin (1993) tell several stories about resistant people and their interventions, as therapists, used to help people get in touch with their resistance. The professional environment is described by the study participants as being marked by adversities, the terms with which the practice of social assistance was associated were: loss, suffering, loneliness, trauma, abuse, etc.

The applied questionnaire allowed to obtain some results that confirm the benchmarks in the specialized literature regarding the resources and indicators of resilience; depending on the specifics of the beneficiaries and the issues addressed by each respondent, they ranked the behaviors specific to resilience differently. The conducted interviews allowed the completion of the quantitative study with qualitative data about the experience, the attitude in relation to the adversities, the description of the professional path and the personal path from which the ways of coping and training the resources of resilience result.

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