Studying the Impact of Professional Interaction on Social Workers' Emotional Burnout

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Abstract: *The article deals with emotional burnout in social workers who work with people who witnessed the conflict, lost loved ones or with numerous refugees who moved to different parts of the country and are rebuilding their lives. The authors of the article used a free-form essay on the topic "The Most Problematic Situations in My Work with Migrants". They analyzed the obtained results using content analysis to identify the main manifestations of "burnout", as well as possible preconditions for its occurrence. The research involved 245 social workers aged between 25 and 45 (work experience of 5 to 10 years), who assist those who have become migrants as a result of hostilities in eastern Ukraine. Most often, negative emotional states in social workers with emotional burnout cause difficulties in the adaptation of migrants from the war zone in eastern Ukraine. Content analysis has shown that most emotionally significant situations in the interaction between social workers and these clients arise because of psychological difficulties. Emotional states of social workers within the structure of emotional burnout are manifested through the identification-separation mechanism. In turn, social workers perceive negative emotional states as a manifestation of their psychological professional inability accompanied by disorders in self-identity and negative content of structural units of self-awareness. Social workers themselves experience several difficulties when communicating with clients and helping them to overcome problematic situations.*

Keywords: *emotional states; emotional burnout; professional interaction; difficult situation; difficulties in the adaptation of migrants; neurophysiological characteristics.*

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Introduction

Emotional burnout is a multifactorial process, which includes the interaction between stress, characteristics of the central nervous system and production environment. Also noteworthy are the studies on neurophysiological characteristics of emotional "burnout". Luijtelaar, Verbraak, Bunt, & Keijsers (2010) indicate that patients experiencing emotional burnout demonstrate the changes in the beta range and a decreased power in the parietal-temporal-occipital parts of the brain. The authors prove that patients with emotional burnout deal with the changes in the alpha range on the electroencephalogram (EEG). The studies by Golonka, Mojsa-Kaja, Blukacz, Gawłowska, & Marek (2019) have shown a decrease in the power of the alpha range on the background of open eyes, a decrease in the amplitude of the alpha rhythm, a correlation of the asymmetry of the alpha rhythm with the stages of emotional burnout. At the same time, the studies on the individual frequency of the alpha rhythm (an indicator of cognitive functioning in a stressful situation) in patients with emotional burnout demonstrate its decrease (Enoch, Chibnall, Schindler, & Slavin, 2013).

The article aims to study the psycho-emotional states accompanying emotional burnout in social workers who assist migrants from the war zone in eastern Ukraine.

Analyzing the Phenomenon of Emotional Burnout

First of all, emotional burnout identification requires consideration of all the performance and symptoms of this phenomenon.

This phenomenon as a social problem was first described in a clinic (Fredenberger, 1974). Working as a psychiatrist in a health centre, Fredenberger (1974) observed a lot of workers who felt gradual burnout, loss of motivation and working capacity. The signs of burnout syndrome were observed during a year and were accompanied by some symptoms of physical health and intellectual sphere. Fredenberger (1974) used the term "burnout" to denote such a state of mental exhaustion.

Researching people's cognitive strategies which are used in the fight against emotional arousal, Maslach (1982) determined that phenomena being investigated influence the professional identification and staff behaviour. She accidentally determined that lawyers call this phenomenon "burnout". The usage of this term in the future showed an explicit understanding of it by test subjects.

The term "burnout" by Maslach, & Jackson (1984) is the most common and generally accepted. According to this term, burnout is a state of physical and emotional exhaustion and cognitive weariness which can be found in social occupations. This syndrome consists of three basic components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced feelings of work-related personal accomplishment. The authors of the article believe that it is no coincidence that Maslach, & Jackson (1984) use the term syndrome, emphasizing the relative dependence of its elements which can also exist on their own as individual elements in other different conditions. The integration of all elements creates burnout syndrome.

Burnout is also regarded as physiological erosion (Etzion, 1987; Maslach, & Leiter, 1997). According to this approach, burnout is defined as a process of erasing psychic energy which appears without warning, develops slowly and does not have a temporary ultimate limit. The human being suddenly starts to feel the symptoms of general exhaustion. The person cannot explain the appearance of them which was caused by the influence of stress factors. Maslach, & Leiter (1997) also describe burnout in terms of erosion by expanding its content. In their opinion, erosion covers not only a sphere of activation but also other spheres of personality such as values, motivations and volition. They consider burnout as the erosion of human's soul which is an irreversible process developing in the spiral.

There are a lot of sources devoted to the symptoms of burnout (Freudenberger, 1974; Maher, 1983; Kahill, 1988; Burish, 1993; Schaufeli, & Enzmann, 1998; Palamarchuk, 2020; Nerubasska, 2020a; Nerubasska, 2020b; Melnyk, 2019; Sheremet, 2019). However, there are differences concerning their amount. Maher (1983) identifies 12 main symptoms. Carroll, & White (1982) suggest 47 symptoms. Some other authors broaden the list to 84 symptoms (Maslach, & Leiter, 1997). There were some attempts to classify burnout symptoms. The most complete classification of burnout symptoms was represented in the work of Schaufeli, & Enzmann (1998). The classification is built on two grounds. The first ground of allocation of symptoms is the character of individuals' sphere which they represent. According to this, they allocated 132 burnout symptoms combined into 5 main groups: 1. Affective. 2. Cognitive. 3. Physical. 4. Behavioural. 5. Motivational. In the authors' view, these symptoms occur at three levels (psychological, interpersonal and organizational) which give an additional cause for classification.

The authors of the article claim that during burnout syndrome one experiences the attitude to oneself and the other human beings depending on the relevant life situation (situational component), previous condition

(transsituational component) and personality characteristics (personal component). Also, they consider burnout syndrome of social workers within the structure of consciousness through the mechanism of "identification and separation". This mechanism reveals opposing and conflict trends in individual's self-awareness who is a part of professional communication and is situated between the necessity to correspond to the state of the client and pursuit to defend one's professional position in the interaction. These conflict trends create negative emotional conditions blocking productive style of interpersonal interaction which proves itself in the prevention strategy of contact.

Activation, tonus, ambivalence, the range of experience, dominant emotion, intensity and individual specificity of emotional look serve as the main characteristics of mental state.

Different functions are typical for a mental-emotional state such as integrative and adaptive function; self-regulating function; organizational and disorganized function; orientation function. The main functional role of emotional states is the preservation of the cooperation of psyche subsystems in the conditions of a changeable environment.

Mental states are inextricably linked to individual personality characteristics. They are intermediate between mental processes and personality characteristics. Emotions and personality go hand in hand at the same time. They serve an integrative function which provides a human response to the current situation and any actions in the environment. Due to this fact, the current situation determines emotional states to a lesser extent than factors of socio-psychological personality structure such as needs, goals, value orientations, settings and the attitude to the living situation, readiness to overcoming challenges and satisfaction of self-realization.

Despite the century-old history of research of "situation" phenomenon and a huge amount of research papers in the various fields of science, there is no unity in the understanding of the situation and its emotional features nature. In general, the situation is regarded as the combination of environment elements or as a fragment of the environment at particular stages of people's lives. The situation is sometimes defined as a personality's cognitive construct which reflects the part of objective reality limited in space-time which has a certain social context.

There are a lot of situation classifications, but two main types can be defined: simple (day-to-day) and complicated (tense, difficult, extreme). The main feature of the complicated situation is a state of mental tension. Mental tension is viewed as a human's reaction to difficulties which are important to

overcome. The human reacts to the situation depending on how he or she perceives and evaluates it.

The relationship between situation and emotions is being discussed in different research. The problem of "motivation optimum" is investigated beyond which emotional behaviour appeared. Emotional situations arise in excessive motivation regarding real adaptational possibilities of the individual.

The phenomenon of emotional burnout is relevant among the representatives of "the man-to-man profession". Indeed, it has become rather global in the field of social work in the last twenty years. The professional uniqueness of social workers lies in the fact that they act as mediators between the state and its citizens, who for one reason or another found themselves in an objectively and subjectively difficult (problematic, crisis or extreme) situation. Such a special responsibility to a special category of clients, as well as emotional burdens, potentially creates the danger of difficult experiences related to work situations and occupational stress.

Working in conditions of special risk can lead to a decrease in both human capacity and efficiency, as well as to negative changes in the psyche and loss of values-based orientations in work. These disorders can affect various aspects of the working process, including professional activities, professional's personality, professional communication. They usually imply that one cannot use the available personal capabilities and tools due to mental fatigue or loses one's skills and abilities. It leads to disorders and deformations of professional activities, as well as reduced productivity in general.

The current difficult political and socio-economic situation in Ukraine highlights the need for a comprehensive study on the psychological state of specialists who assist victims forced to migrate to safer regions of Ukraine (Gerasymova, 2019; Onishchuk, 2020; Maksymchuk, 2020a; Maksymchuk, 2020b).

The profession of a social worker is also associated with a specific risk. It is so because social workers deal with disadvantaged people experiencing stress suffering for whose health and life they take moral responsibility. In addition to using professional knowledge, skills and abilities, social workers rely on their personality. Indeed, they act as emotional donors, which also implies occupational risk factors.

Social workers face various kinds of difficult situations. Moreover, communication situation includes a wide range of clients' emotional states. The lack of confidence, anxiety and stress are common among the unemployed people. Former convicts are vulnerable to waiting, hope or

hopelessness, longing, boredom and apathy, frustration and desperation. Elderly people live in a state of fear, oppression, social insecurity, loneliness and a sense of lesser worth. People with special needs are in the negative self-evaluated state; they are unhappy with themselves and the other people. Children with special needs suffer from hospitalism syndrome, neurotic disorders, pathological formation of personality, overall and mental development.

The main emotional states which the social worker faced are disappointment, desperation, apathy, frustration, fear, frustration, anxiety, loneliness and hopelessness. Working with these states requires peculiar psychological knowledge and skills, certain personal qualities of an expert.

Clients' unfavourable emotional states (disappointment, desperation, apathy, frustration, fear, anxiety, loneliness and hopelessness) bring out their own negative experiences in a social worker. When dealing with clients, helping them to overcome the difficulties, social workers also feel several challenges. As a result, the client's objectively difficult situation becomes a social worker's subjective difficulty which is a part of his professional consciousness. This, however, poses a complex emotional set which includes basic emotions and situational emotional states. This set encourages the professional to realize the possibilities of solving the difficult situation and can be a cause of negative physical and mental human's state including deprivation of his or her self-awareness.

The analysis of psychological literature shows that the conditions and factors which create the burnout syndrome have been studied rather broadly. Yet, there is no information which describes psycho-emotional states that accompany the burnout syndrome among social workers who assist migrants from combat operational zone.

The purpose of the study was to explore psycho-emotional states that accompany the burnout syndrome among social workers who assist migrants from a war zone in the east of Ukraine.

The research involved 245 social workers aged between 25 and 45 (work experience of 5 to 10 years), who assist those who have become migrants as a result of hostilities in eastern Ukraine.

The authors of the article used a free-form essay on the topic "The Most Problematic Situations in My Work with Migrants".

They analyzed the obtained results using content analysis to identify the main manifestations of "burnout", as well as possible preconditions for its occurrence.

Emotional States of Social Workers when Interacting with Clients

The reflexive method revealed the peculiarities of emotional states among social workers in the process of working with clients. The authors of the article defined that social workers who face clients' adjustment difficulties in deplorable living conditions have negative emotional states. Difficulties in adjusting among elderly people, children and adults with special need, the unemployed who have the status of displaced person are the main reason for negative emotions among social workers. A content analysis of essays showed that a majority of emotionally relevant situations arise in connection with psychological difficulties during interaction with social workers and clients.

The specialists go through negative emotional states connected with professional psychological insolvency such as frustration about lack of psychological knowledge and skills (89.6%), lack of the patience to hear the client (83%), a state of depression and apathy as a result of identification with clients' negative emotional states (81.1%), anxiety concerning lack of professional ability to deal constructively with conflict situations (82.8%).

Absence of success in professional communication leads to deprivation of recognition and devaluation of the personal importance of social worker. This indicates low self-professional-confidence, possibilities (88.5%), dissatisfaction with the results of their work (56%) and their professional status (43.4%).

Deprivation to recognition is accompanied by violations in the structural link which is called "Social Space of Personality" Social workers serve as mediators, assistants. Therefore, they must psychologically correctly respond to negative clients' reactions, keep psychologically tested distance, show emotional restraint and tolerance. Mistrust, discontent and aggression cause frustration among the specialists (79.7%). The part of the workers feels guilty (38.5%) and most of them resentful (96.2%) and though they try to hide the irritation. The profession of social worker requires being understanding and empathetic; that is why they control their emotions. This ambivalent state of social workers the authors of the article classified as an occupational personality conflict between their social debt as a mediator and an assistant and their right to show negative emotions connected with emotional difficulties during communication with clients. The evaluation of the clients activates the mechanism of identification and separation among social workers. The social worker wants the identification with clients on the one hand and the exclusion from them on the other hand. These

peculiarities of the emotional state of social workers have their specific features in interaction with different clients' categories.

Conclusions

The peculiarities of emotional states among social workers within the structure of the burnout syndrome manifest themselves through the action of the mechanism of "identification and separation". This mechanism reveals opposing and conflict trends included in professional communication of individual's self-awareness between the necessity to correspond to the state of the client and pursuit to defend his or her professional position in the interaction.

Negative emotional states such as dissatisfaction, tension, emotional weakness, lack of confidence, confusion which appear among social workers during difficult situations of interaction with migrants from a war zone in the east of Ukraine become a cause of professional, personal and interpersonal issues. Negative emotional states from the point of view of social workers are accompanied by violations of self-identity and negative content of structural links of consciousness.

The article acknowledges that negative emotional states of clients such as disappointment, desperation, apathy, frustration, fear, frustration, anxiety, loneliness and hopelessness bring out negative feelings in a social worker. When dealing with clients, helping them to overcome the difficulties, social workers also feel several challenges.

Being under the influence of negative emotions the social worker feels the difficulties in the realization of professional duty to be a leader in communication and falls under influence of the client. Empathy ability connects with an attempt to contain the activity and authoritarianism. However, the specialist may exercise the right of defence in the event of hostile attitude by the client. Passive defensive reactions in professional communication appear in subordinate behaviour. Active defensive reactions combine hypersensitivity to critical remarks, sense of insecurity in connection with the ill will of clients.

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