Building Resilience as a Contemporary Challenge for Social Workers

Monika Punová

Abstract - **This paper focuses on the resilience of social workers. It aims to highlight strategies for increasing resilience in social workers in their daily practice to enable them to cope with the pressures of their demanding role. The current turbulent times, particularly in relation to the management of the Covid-19 pandemic and working with war refugees from Ukraine, are testament to this demanding nature. Resilience itself is defined as a concept that refers to the dynamic multi-level process of adaptation and achieving the desired level of well-being of a social worker despite experiencing distinct difficulties in managing their professional role. Within this conception, resilience is not seen as a static personality characteristic, but as a concept that has a changing, situational character over time.**

Keywords—*resilience, well-being, risk factor, protective factor, social worker*

I. Introduction

Social work is associated with a variety of challenges. At first sight, it may appear that these challenges relate solely to the clients with whom they work. It is a fact that reflexive assessment of the client's situation [1], choosing the appropriate approach, and applying the intervention in practice to achieve the client's desired well-being [2], [3], etc. are not straightforward. This text, however, focuses on social workers. It is based on the assumption that attention should be paid to their well-being because they too are human beings, have their own needs, and are influenced by their environment [4].

Reflections on coping with their professional difficulties lead us to the theme of resilience, which consists of favorable development despite adverse circumstances. This text reflects on selected characteristics of social workers' resilience and considers ways to strengthen it in their daily practice in order to cope with the pressures of their professional role. It aims to answer the question: What are the characteristics of resilience and how can it be strengthened in social workers? As the following will show, social work is a demanding profession that requires a significant degree of resilience.

II. Risk status of social work

The topic of the burden placed on social workers has been addressed by a number of researchers. They reflect the fact that due to the demanding nature of the profession, they are vulnerable to exhaustion [5], [6]. [7].

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It is also shown that compared to other helping professions, social workers are at a higher risk of burnout syndrome [8], [9], [10]. The challenging fate of social workers is also evidenced by the current times when workers are looking for ways to best help refugees from Ukraine, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, in a large-scale study of stress among workers working with children at risk, it was found that almost half of the workers (n=1996) experienced some level of stress during the pandemic [11].

The fact that the demands placed on workers during a pandemic required considerable strain on their coping has been reported in a number of other studies [12], [13], [14], [15]. Many workers had to cope with being placed in home offices, not being able to have face-to-face contact with clients, and changes in the nature of the interventions provided. There has also been a boom in communication through online platforms, which some workers have struggled with. There was also a strain on their work-life balance and those who were not achieving it were struggling with e.g. overtime, and working on holidays, which had a negative impact on family wellbeing. Overall, it was challenging to balance work life with caring for a family (many parents had to care for children who were being home-schooled due to school closures). They were also, in many cases, concerned about their health and that of their family members and had to deal with considerable uncertainty about their future development. The example of the pandemic makes explicit the fact that the implementation of social work is also challenging due to the fact that the personal lives of workers are also reflected in it.

But the burden placed on social workers may not necessarily be devastating. After all, stress and strain belong to life, they are a natural part of it. What is key, however, is its degree, chronicity, and character, which do not necessarily have negative consequences. Sometimes it can also have an activating role and can lead to not only surviving but also thriving [16], [17], [18]. It shows the immeasurable power of human potential and environmental resources. And is the connection between human fragility and resilience that will be highlighted in the next section, where we will explore the concept of resilience in more detail.

III. Resilience

Recently, we have seen considerable interest in the topic of resilience, not only in the helping professions. If we type the term "resilience" into Google, it results in 716 million occurrences, which is almost triple the number of occurrences of the term "stress". Politicians also started talking about resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic, and in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine, resilience is becoming part of official statements and documents. There has also been a growing interest among researchers. For

example, the PubMed database had a total of 1,718 texts on resilience in 2012 and more than 12,000 a decade later.

In 2020, the journal Adversity and Resilience Science was founded, focusing on an interdisciplinary perspective within the social sciences. In the following year, an international conference organised by the European Association of Schools of Social Work (EASSW), Innovation and Resilience: Preparedness of Social Work Education in Uncertain Times, was dedicated to the topic. We see that resilience is becoming a phenomenon in the contemporary professional and laic space.

What is the reason for this interest? The answer must be sought in the characteristics of resilience. To understand it, it is also necessary to look at history. The research of Emma Werner and her team [19] (which included social workers) conducted on Kauai, Hawaii, is considered pioneering. The researchers chose approximately 700 children born in 1955 and studied the development of these children for 40 years - at ages 1, 2, 10, 18, 32, and 40. These children came from families at risk of social exclusion, and the researchers focused on their vulnerability. In line with the knowledge at the time, they expected that a deprived family context would have negative effects on their future. It turned out that 30% of the children were raised in very difficult conditions (poverty, parental illness, neglect, violence, divorced parents) - it was these that they paid particular attention to. Their assumptions about negative behavioral thriving were confirmed in two-thirds of the children (at 10 and 18 years of age they had learning problems, problems with the law, and psychological problems). But to their surprise, the remaining one-third of the children with at-risk status thrived as well as their peers (they set realistic goals in life, which they achieved, and generally had no problem functioning in a normal way). And it was on these that they focused their attention. At first, they thought that these children were gifted with specific skills, but later they began to view the topic more broadly and were at the origin of research in resilience.

This pioneering research has been followed up by other researchers. For example, psychiatrist Garmezy focused on the children of his mentally ill patients, and Rutter studied the children of mothers with a history of drug use. As in the research on the children of Kauai, their research found children who, despite negative assumptions, were able to cope with their situation and generally thrived [20]. We should add that although the origins of the concept are linked to developmental psychologists, it was social work professor Henry Maas who first published it [21]. Based on research among 20 young adults who were separated from their parents during World War II, he found that these adolescents were able to cope resiliently with early childhood separation.

What are the common findings of the initial resilience research? First of all, it has been shown that a negative past and living in adverse conditions do not have to lead to negative thriving, nor does it have to be a barrier to positive development. And it is this positive development despite adverse circumstances that researchers have focused on. First, they examined the individual resilience of at-risk children and adolescents. Later, they began to reflect on the family or other systems (such as the classroom, the community, the school, and the organization). There was also an evolution in the focus of the research. The initial focus on individual factors of resilience (whether risk or protective) and their effects on individual resilience showed that it was not enough to focus on the individual alone, to view them in isolation from the reality of their environment. In other words, it is not enough to examine individual resilience without context; it needs to be seen within the wider social environment.

The object of interest for researchers and practitioners has also evolved. In considering what are the characteristics and strategies for strengthening the resilience of clients, it was found that the resilience of those working with them is also important. Thus, the focus has shifted to caregivers as well as students preparing to enter the profession.

After a historical overview, we come to the definition of the term. The origin is in the Latin re-silio, re-siliere, re-salire and means to bounce, to rebound. The definition is not easy because there is no common understanding. While early researchers saw it as the result of successful adaptation in the face of adversity (they looked at those who overcame a difficulty), later researchers also looked at the causes of this condition and came to see resilience more as a process of coping well with adversity. In the context of the topic of this paper, resilience will be defined as a concept referring to a multilevel dynamic process of favorable development and achievement of the desired well-being of a social worker despite experiencing difficulties in the context of coping with their professional role. It consists of successful interactions with the environment about resources in order to achieve the desired well-being in the face of potential or actual adversity. Applying resilience also involves recovery and learning lessons for the future [23].

Initially, resilience was examined as a static, personality trait in the sense of resilience, with researchers looking for traits of resilient people [24]. Later, they began to see the broader environment and resilience are viewed in dynamic terms. Pointing out the dynamic nature of the process is related to the fact that in the context of contemporary fluid society, it is perceived as changing over time, as situationally determined. Another aspect - multileveled - is related to the social-ecological concept, which is a fundamental defining feature of resilience. Other features include that it is based on a potential-oriented approach [22].

In order for resilience to take action, interactions between risk and protective factors are needed at all socio-ecological levels. Both risks and resources are needed for the application of resilience. And it is the factors acting on resilience that are the focus of the following section. I draw on research conducted among social workers in the Czech Republic. We investigated the protective factors of resilience among 38 social workers engaged in social work with families at risk [25].

IV. Resilience factors

In general, both risk and protective factors are important for the exercise of resilience. The role of protective factors - resources - is crucial for the application of resilience because, as the above definition shows, resilience is related

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to the ability of people to use resources, to negotiate with the environment for resources. Resources were the focus of our research [25]. We explored positive aspects of the professional role of social workers working with families at risk.

In the Czech Republic, the activities of social workers dealing with this clientele are diverse. It is related to the social and legal protection of children, which seeks to protect the best interests of the child. Workers then act in different roles. They may work within the framework of the state body for the social protection of children (OSPOD) or in other registered social services which are non-state actors. These include low threshold facilities for children and youth, social activation services for families with children, outreach services, shelters, intervention centres, professional social counselling, aftercare services, personal assistance and day service centres. Our research focused on workers in the above-mentioned types of services.

The research was based on an inductive strategy and through 6 focus groups among 38 social workers we explored which protective factors of resilience social workers identify in their professional role. Informants were recruited through purposive sampling, with selection criteria including current professional practice and involvement with families at risk. These included socially excluded families, families with a history of domestic violence, families providing foster care, multi-problem families under the supervision of the OSPOD, and ethnically and nationally diverse groups living in the Czech Republic. Our aim was to cover the widest possible spectrum of protective agents from different social work settings.

The results were analysed through thematic analysis, identifying three resource areas that informants felt contributed most to increasing resilience in the implementation of social work with families at risk. Staff identified (1) connectedness as a key resource, which comes from collaboration within the organisation (supervision, intervision, support team, meetings, shared philosophy of the organization's service delivery). Supportive relationships and a team to fall back on appeared to facilitate the performance of the profession. They also draw support from relationships with other organizations or representatives of other helping professions (psychologists, doctors, psychiatrists, and educators). Another area of support for resilience, according to the workers interviewed (2), is education and professional experience. These make their interventions informed by evidence-based approaches. Participants also spoke of being able to cope better with professional difficulties as their length of experience and experience increases. The final area of resources stems from working with clients (3). Although working with clients is often very challenging, workers also found it to be a resource that strengthens their resilience. In this context, they spoke of the joy they feel when they are able to help a client and contribute to their change and positive development. They also referred to the role of meaningfulness in their work with clients, intrinsic meaning, and confidence. Understandably, the research revealed other aspects that contribute to staff resilience, however the above were identified as key.

The research presented here is a brief treatment of the topic of protective factors of resilience. There is no platform for a deeper reflection on the topic. The topic of resilience factors of social workers has been the subject of a number of researchs, but this text is not aimed at analyzing them. Using the example of our research, we tried to highlight possible protective resilience factors in the Czech context. The following section will present specific principles that should underpin strategies leading to the development of social workers' resilience.

v. **Strategies for engancing resilience**

It has been pointed out in the previous text that social workers face a number of difficulties within their profession which can threaten their resilience. Increasing resilience thus becomes one of the key challenges. How to respond to this challenge? What strategies should be chosen to increase resilience? Answers to these questions should be based on the fundamental principles of resilience. These are the ones we will focus on in this last section and derive the strategies based on them.

The first principle refers to the social constructivist view of resilience [26] and emphasizes that coping with adverse circumstances is related to successfully negotiating resources with the environment in order to achieve the desired well-being. It appears that for humans to cope and thrive, attention also needs to be paid to culture and, most importantly, the individual's own view of their resilience needs to be reflected. This reflects the importance of worker participation in defining their own well-being. The emphasis on participation is not new in social work, indeed it is also applied in work with clients [27], [28], [29].

The second principle builds on the strength-based approach and puts the focus not on what threatens the worker, but rather on their resources, opportunities for growth, and positive change. The basic premise is that every organism is set up for healthy development, and normal functioning. This concept is radically different from the original deficit models that emphasized weaknesses, risks, and threats, and ultimately led to learned helplessness, passivity, and limited growth potential [23].

The starting point of *the third principle* [20] is the social ecological (or ecosystem) approach, which emphasizes the key role of all types of environments in promoting resilience. The micro level (bio-psycho-spiritual-social dimension of the worker), the meso level (family, friends, co-workers, supervisors, professional sector), or the macro level (the system of policies regulating the functioning of clients and workers, the media image of clients and workers, public opinion regarding the role of social workers in society) are key. This list does not claim to be complete; it is merely illustrative. The bottom line is that interactions between risk and protective factors in all types of settings are important for the application of resilience. The nature of the interactions may vary because the factors may be probabilistic in nature. This can be illustrated with the example of empathy. It can be a resource for a worker to help them cope with the difficulties associated with

performing a professional role. Empathy can also have risk potential if, for example, he does not show this empathy in the right way, if he is empathetic to the needs of his clients rather than his own resulting in exhaustion and his resilience compromised [22].

The last fourth principle [20] is seemingly simple. Although at first glance it may appear that resilience is something that is difficult to achieve, this may not be the fact. According to the pioneer of the concept, Masten [30], it lies in ordinary human functioning in the sense of ordinary magic. It does not consist in seeking extraordinary resources or applying extraordinary skills but primarily focuses on every day, available resources and solution options. It looks for these first in the person and then in his or her immediate environment. These may include, for example, a healthy lifestyle, work-life balance, sufficient time for family, friends, and hobbies, and the cultivation of spiritual development of the personality.

For the purpose of illustration, the individual strategies are summarised in points:

1. coping with adversity is related to negotiating resources with the environment, and the worker's own perspective on how they define their resilience is also important in the application of resilience (social constructivist approach);

2. it is essential to focus primarily on resources, opportunities for positive development and growth (strength-based approach);

3. it is important to reflect on risk and protective factors in all environments in order to apply resilience (social-ecological approach);

4. resilience is not an extraordinary capacity for extraordinary individuals, but in many cases, it depends on commonly available resources (Masten's concept of ordinary magic).

A precondition for the application of these strategies is a deep knowledge of the topic of resilience and related topics (e.g. coping strategies, risks, resources, stress) and the development of skills that are important for its application (e.g. cultivating spiritual growth, developing emotional intelligence, reflecting on the meaningfulness of burdens in life).

VI. **Conclusion**

This text aimed to answer the question: what are the characteristics of resilience and how can it be strengthened in social workers? Firstly, the difficulties associated with the implementation of the profession were highlighted, which have multiplied with the development of the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. This burden is taking on an unprecedented form for some workers, and in the case of work with Ukrainian refugees, it is becoming chronic and associated with uncertainty (we have no knowledge of when it will end). It is the nature of this burden that implies the importance of the topic of resilience for social workers, the development of which is becoming one of the key challenges.

Resilience is a subject of interest to a number of researchers, it was not possible within the limited scope of this paper to reflect on it in depth. There is currently a range of research published on this topic, with researchers focusing, for example, on specific actions employers can take to cultivate resilience in their employees. Criticisms of the concept are also discussed, pointing to its neoliberal emphasis and neglect of the broader political context [23]. It should be added here that this criticism is justified in the case of the original static concept, which emphasized the responsibility of the individual to exercise their resilience. The current dynamic conception reflects the fact that environmental support is also important for the exercise of an individual's resilience. In the case of the social worker, the nature of the culture of the organization, the working environment, the attitude of supervisors, the reward system, the nature of the clientele, legislation, the prestige of social work in the eyes of the public, etc.) are also important.

What is the purpose of the above resilience-building strategies? First of all, it turns the attention of not only social workers but also other stakeholders (such as theorists and policymakers) to the hope that the fragility of social workers is accompanied by their resilience and the strength of the human potential and resources found in the environment. It brings hope for positive developments in social work. This is despite the fact that at first glance it may appear that its achievement is not realistic.

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