SUMMARY

The phenomenon of burnout in social workers has become a subject of widespread scientific interest. This study aims to evaluate the prevalence of burnout in Russian social workers and to analyze the factors that contribute to its development.

METHODS

The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was used to assess burnout symptoms. The study included 324 social workers from various social service institutions in Russia.

RESULTS

The results showed a high level of burnout symptoms among Russian social workers, with 34.3% reporting emotional exhaustion, 22.4% reporting depersonalization, and 54.4% reporting reduced personal accomplishment. The most significant factors contributing to burnout were role conflicts, lack of control, and low job satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

The findings highlight the need for interventions to support social workers and improve working conditions. Further research is needed to investigate the effectiveness of different interventions in reducing burnout.

CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to the understanding of burnout in social workers and provides a basis for developing effective strategies to prevent and manage burnout in this profession.
The studies cited remove the ambiguity accompanying the discussion of burnout, and which, in an obvious way, contrasts with the presence of the concept of burnout in traditional descriptions of the current situation related to teachers, doctors, social workers, and representatives of other professions focused on interacting with people. In social work, we are talking about interacting with clients in difficult life situations, which makes communication with them even more emotionally loaded and, presumably, requires the employee to initially have lofty motives for professional activity. It is logical to assume that the collision of such motivation with the reality of an extremely bureaucratized, low-paid activities of social services, which is devoid of the creative component, leads to the spread of burnout, making it possible to see in the social worker a victim of the organization of the social service system that is unfavorable for personal growth and self-realization. Thus, the problem of burnout, understood in this way, is not only a concept of social psychology proper and not only an individual deformation of the personality, revealed by psychological testing or interviews, but also part of the social workers’ image, and their social portrait. This allows presenting burnout as a characteristic of social workers as a homogeneous social group, in a certain sense heroizing its image, making it socially attractive through the intentional or unintentional exacerbation of the accompanying value conflict. This image of a social worker is the dominant version of the occupation in the public consciousness. Accordingly, within the framework of this research, we attempted to consider professional burnout as an element of modern social worker’s social portrait. The research objective was to identify the level of occupational burnout and its assessment in the context of a set of social and professional features of social workers in Russia.

MATERIALS AND METHODS
The research involved a combination of theoretical and empirical methods. The first included: theoretical analysis of scientific literature, study and generalization of the experience of socio-psychological research of social workers as a social group in the existing scientific discourse. To obtain quantitative characteristics of the studied problem in identification of the place and significance of burnout in the general socio-psychological features of social workers, the survey method was applied, using the formalized questioning and test techniques.

The collection of empirical data was carried out in 2020-2021. The study involved 420 social workers of the Lipetsk region in Russia. They should be distinguished from specialists in social work in the realities of the social protection system in the Russian Federation. The social workers’ professional duties include work to directly improve the material and living conditions of the social service organization clientele: buying food, medicines, helping with housekeeping, obtaining benefits, etc.

The respondents were offered a questionnaire consisting of 6 questions and aimed to find out the formal data and general assessments by the respondents of their professional activities, as well as a questionnaire to determine the degree of occupational burnout (OB). For testing, we used the Russian version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), adapted for specialists in socionic professions (VODOPYANOVA et al., 2013). The first Russian-language version of the questionnaire was developed based on the burnout model by C. Maslach and S.E. Jackson and validated in 2002 (VODOPYANOVA and STARCHENKOVA, 2005). The questionnaire consists of 3 subscales (emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and reduced personal accomplishment (RPA), which were again standardized by the authors of adaptation in 2013 (VODOPYANOVA et al., 2013) for samples of women and men. Emotional exhaustion manifests itself in emotional tension, fatigue, and inability to find resources for emotional recovery. Depersonalization is associated with cynicism, increased difficulties in communicating with colleagues and clients, and negative reactions to others. Finally, reduced personal accomplishment means to negatively evaluate the worth of one’s work. High scores on the first two scales and low scores on the third scale correspond to a high level of burnout.

Considering the sample specifics, the research used questionnaire scales designed for the study of women. The mean values and standard deviations were determined for each scale, as well as for the integral indicator (Int.OB) of occupational burnout, which was calculated by the formula:

\[
\text{Int.OB} = 4.386 + 0.1155 \text{EE} + 0.1747 \text{DP} - 0.0998 \text{RPA} \quad (2).
\]
The use of the version of the questionnaire validated in Russia allows taking into account the national specifics of the sample and exclude possible errors caused by the corresponding differences (SCHAUFELI and VAN DIERENDONCK, 1995). The processing and analysis of empirical data was carried out applying the SPSS software-analytical complex version 22.

RESEARCH RESULTS
The interviewed social workers are women, most of whom are 35 to 68 years old. The distribution of respondents by age, education and work experience is shown in Table 1. Respondents’ answers to questions regarding their attitude to the occupation are given in Table 2. The data obtained clearly demonstrate the social worker’s portrait in a small town in Russia. These are women, in most cases, of pre-retirement age, with relatively little work experience. Attention is drawn to the high level of university education (38.3%), which contrasts with limited qualification requirements for this occupation. In fact, it corresponds to the share of people with higher education among employed women in Russia as a whole, which was 39% in 2019 (LABOR FORCE, EMPLOYMENT AND UNEMPLOYMENT IN RUSSIA, 2020). In the particular case under consideration, the explanation should be sought in the small number of jobs available in the city and region, requiring high qualifications, combined with the availability and spread of higher education in recent decades. It is possible to predict further growth of this indicator in the coming years.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents by age, education and work experience (N = 420)

| AGE           | Frequency | %  |
|---------------|-----------|----|
| 18–34         | 31        | 7.4|
| 35–68         | 389       | 92.6|

| EDUCATION                                      | Frequency | %  |
|------------------------------------------------|-----------|----|
| Incomplete secondary education                | 46        | 11 |
| Basic vocational education (specialized school)| 95        | 22.6|
| Secondary vocational education (college)       | 118       | 28.1|
| Higher education (university)                  | 161       | 38.3|

| WORK EXPERIENCE AS A SOCIAL WORKER             | Frequency | %  |
|------------------------------------------------|-----------|----|
| Less than 1 year                               | 62        | 14.8|
| 1-5 years                                      | 111       | 26.4|
| 6-10 years                                     | 69        | 16.4|
| 11-15 years                                    | 63        | 15 |
| 16-20 years                                    | 46        | 11 |
| 21-24 years                                    | 31        | 7.4|
| 25-30 years                                    | 38        | 9  |

Source: Search data.

Table 2. Distribution of answers to questions about the attitude to the occupation (N=420)

| WHY DID YOU CHOOSE THIS JOB? (multiple answers) | Frequency | %  |
|------------------------------------------------|-----------|----|
| I like work scope                              | 96        | 22.8|
| Satisfied with the level of remuneration        | 114       | 27.1|
| Convenient work schedule                       | 161       | 33.5|
| There is no other more suitable job             | 29        | 6.9 |
| I want to help people                          | 272       | 64.8|
| Others                                         | 10        | 2.4 |

| ARE YOU SATISFIED WITH YOUR WORK IN GENERAL? (one answer) | Frequency | %  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------|----|
| Yes                                                       | 214       | 51 |
| Rather another                                              | 133       | 31.7|
| Rather no                                              | 31        | 7.4 |
| No                                                        | 42        | 10 |
| I find it difficult to answer                             | -         | -  |

| WHAT ARE YOUR FUTURE PLANS? (one answer)                | Frequency | %  |
|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------|----|
| I continue working as a social worker                   | 342       | 81.7|
| I will change the job soon                              | 14        | 3.3 |
| Others                                                  | 63        | 15 |

Source: Search data.
Interpreting questions about attitudes towards the profession seems to be more complex. The data allow us to see the distribution of the answers preferred by the respondents, but it is difficult to draw conclusions about the sincerity of the choices in a relatively small team of employees. It is also necessary to take into account the initially low expectations from the job, which is traditionally considered not prestigious and remains low-paid. Against this background, we have an extremely high value of job satisfaction (the options “yes” and “rather yes than no” give 82.7% of the choices in total) and a large number of choices of the socially approved option “I want to help people” (64.8%) in response to a question about the reasons for choosing a job. It should be noted that only 22.8% of social workers indicated the content of work as the reason for their choice. The desire of the majority of respondents (81.7%) to continue working in their profession demonstrates to a large extent the difficult situation on the labor market. The actual occupational burnout was assessed using a particular questionnaire. In addition to determining the mean values and standard deviation for each of the scales and the integral indicator (Table 3), the results of each respondent were ranked according to three levels of how pronounced is the corresponding indicator: low, medium, and high (Table 4).

| Table 3. Primary descriptive statistics (N=420) |
|-----------------------------------------------|
|                                                |
| Mean         | Standard deviation |
|----------------|
| Emotionalexhaustion (EE), | 20.79 | 8.775 |
| Depersonalization (DP) | 8.52 | 5.370 |
| Reducedpersonalaccomplishment (RPA) | 33.24 | 7.895 |
| Integral indicator of occupational burnout (Int.OB) | 4.96 | 2.178 |

Source: Search data.

| Table 4. Burnout parameters distribution (N=420) |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Frequency | %    |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION (EE) | |
| Low level | 103 | 24.5 |
| Average level | 266 | 63.3 |
| High level | 51 | 12.1 |
| DEPERSONALIZATION (DP) | |
| Low level | 132 | 31.4 |
| Average level | 267 | 63.6 |
| High level | 21 | 5 |
| REDUCED PERSONAL ACCOMPLISHMENT (RPA) | |
| Low level | 72 | 17.1 |
| Average level | 299 | 71.2 |
| High level | 49 | 11.7 |
| INTEGRAL INDICATOR OF OCCUPATIONAL BURNOUT(Int.OB) | |
| Low level | 145 | 34.5 |
| Average level | 228 | 54.3 |
| High level | 47 | 11.2 |

Source: Search data.

In general, the results of processing the responses show that a high degree of burnout can be observed only in relation to 11.9% of the participants. The majority (54.3%) have an average degree of occupational burnout, and only a slightly smaller number of social workers have a low degree of occupational burnout (34.5%). The results were distributed in a similar way according to particular criteria. A significant predominance of the average level of reduced personal accomplishment (71.2%) is typical, which can be explained by the insignificant potential for professional growth at the social worker’s position, which stimulates the choice of average options when answering questions related to occupational accomplishments.

**DISCUSSION**

The results obtained can be compared both with general trends in considering the problem of occupational burnout, and with the available partial results related to the social workers’ professional burnout analysis. In addition, the study allows getting an idea of the social workers’ attitude towards professional activity in a provincial Russian city, which can be considered as an addition to the body of data available in sociology and social psychology in this area of professional activity. In this case, burnout can be one of the key indicators reflecting not only “a psychological syndrome that develops in response to chronic emotional and
interpersonal job stressors” (MASLACH, 2015), but, indirectly, also the degree of social workers’ involvement in the performance of their professional duties, their satisfaction with working conditions, and activity prospects.

First of all, we note that most of the studies that have addressed the issues of social workers’ motivation contain statements about the significant presence of altruistic motives. This has been noted as related to current social workers (FISHER, 2009; RACKAUSKIENE et al., 2013), and in relation to students training in the same specialty (BOZEK et al., 2017; CHRISTIE and KRUK, 1998; LIEDGREN and ELVHAGE, 2015). And although we do not unambiguously affirm the real prevalence of such motives, based on the results of our survey, a large number of choices of the option “I want to help people” remains indicative. This indicates that there is a consensus among the surveyed social workers regarding the expected motivation in choosing an occupational area, and that providing assistance and support to those in need is clearly interpreted in connection with social work as an internal motive necessary for an expert.

The study showed that a high level of occupational burnout can be observed in 11.2% of respondents (according to the integral indicator of professional burnout), which indicates the relative prevalence of this phenomenon. At the same time, most of the subjects showed an average level of burnout, and about a third - a low one. An important indicator is the fact that the vast majority of social workers in the survey intend to continue working in this field.

Comparing these data with those that were published earlier in domestic and foreign research, we see that the results obtained demonstrate a much more favorable picture than most of the previous studies. The results received in the course of this study, which determine the relatively low proportion of people with severe burnout syndrome, can be explained both by the relatively limited set of responsibilities of social workers who took part in the survey, and by the absence of any career aspirations and prospects in most of them.

CONCLUSION

In the current research, three conditions (factors) of the presence or absence of professional burnout can be distinguished: the personal factor (a sense of self-worth in the workplace, the possibility of professional advancement, autonomy and the level of the management control); role-based factor (the development of burnout is influenced by the conflict of roles and role uncertainty, as well as professional situations in which the employees’ joint actions are not coordinated to a large extent); organizational factor (lack of clarity of functional responsibilities, leadership style that does not allow for independence).

The social worker occupation, which involves direct contact with people in difficult life situations, is obviously one of the most conducive to the formation of a syndrome of occupational burnout. Low wages, combined with a serious emotional stress, act as factors contributing to the employee’s professional disorganization. But, as it was established in the study, in the specific conditions of a small town in Russia, the social workers’ general characteristics presuppose not only a desire to continue their professional activities in the chosen specialty, but also a relatively low percentage of people in whom a high degree of professional burnout can be observed.

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Resumo
O objetivo do artigo foi identificar o nível de burnout profissional e sua avaliação com referência a um conjunto de características sociais e profissionais dos assistentes sociais na Rússia. A novidade da pesquisa foi considerar o burnout como parte da imagem estabelecida pela assistente social. Os autores passaram do pressuposto de que a ocupação de assistentes sociais, que envolve o contato direto com pessoas em situações difíceis de vida, é obviamente uma das mais propícias ao desenvolvimento de uma síndrome de burnout ocupacional, e é percebida na sociedade dessa forma. Os baixos salários, combinados com um estresse emocional significativo, atuam como fatores que contribuem para a desorganização profissional do empregado. No entanto, como foi encontrado no estudo, nas condições específicas da Rússia, as características gerais dos assistentes sociais pressupõem não apenas o desejo de continuar a atividade profissional na especialidade escolhida, mas também um percentual relativamente baixo de pessoas com alto grau de burnout ocupacional.

Palavras-chave: Trabalhador social. Burnout. Stress. Atividade ocupacional.