
Original research article

PERSONALITY OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN DIFFERENT AREAS OF SOCIAL WORK

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Abstract

This research aims to analyse the personality traits of social workers in different areas of social work using the NEO-FFI questionnaire, one of the most widely used instruments for measuring the five main personality dimensions. Although this instrument is commonly used in psychological research, no studies are available to date that examine the personality structure of social workers using the NEO-FFI. This study, therefore, represents an innovative approach to understanding how personality traits (neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) influence performance and satisfaction in this demanding profession. The results show statistically significant differences in personality traits between social workers and the general population, while the type of social service provided and the age group of clients do not have a statistically significant effect on these results. This study provides new insights into the personality profile of social workers, which may have practical implications for selection, education, and professional development in this field.

Keywords: *Big Five; NEO-FFI; Personality psychology; Personality traits; Social work*

INTRODUCTION

The personality of social workers plays a vital role in providing quality and effective assistance to clients in various areas of social work. This profession requires professional knowledge and specific personality traits that allow social workers to manage challenging situations and work effectively with people who often find themselves in complex living conditions. Research in personality psychology, particularly the “Big Five” theory, provides a framework for understanding how different personality dimensions can influence performance and satisfaction in social work. This article focuses on analysing the personality traits of social workers and their impact on work performance. It aims to compare the results achieved with those of the general Czech population and to analyse the influence of various factors on these results, such as the type

of social service provided and the age group of clients. The innovative contribution of our research is that there are currently no studies available that use the NEO-FFI questionnaire to examine the personality traits of social workers.

Theoretical groundwork

The topic of personality in social workers is crucial for understanding how personal qualities and character traits influence the performance of this profession. Social workers encounter challenging situations daily that require professional knowledge and specific personality characteristics, enabling them to work effectively with clients and face emotional and psychological challenges. The personality traits of social workers are often discussed in the context of their influence on work performance and the quality of services provided. According to Sowbel and Miller (2014),

the vital personality traits that contribute to success in this profession are empathy, emotional stability, social intelligence, and the ability to manage stress. Empathy is a cornerstone for establishing a therapeutic relationship between a social worker and a client. Clients perceive social workers with higher levels of empathy as more supportive and effective (Eriksson and Englander, 2017). Emotional intelligence is another crucial factor that influences the work of social workers. According to research by Matthews et al. (2004), emotional intelligence is associated with effectively managing stress and negative emotions, which is indispensable in social work. Social workers with high levels of emotional intelligence are better equipped to work with clients facing traumatic situations. They can better regulate their own emotions, which increases their work performance and reduces the risk of burnout (Morrison, 2007).

Concerning personality psychology, one of the most widely used concepts for describing and measuring personality traits is the “Big Five” model. This model identifies five main personality dimensions: neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness (compassion), and conscientiousness (John, 2021).

Neuroticism is a personality dimension that relates to an individual’s emotional stability and their tendency to experience negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, or depression. Social workers with high levels of neuroticism may be more prone to burnout and increased stress levels, which negatively affect their ability to provide quality care. According to a study by Lloyd et al. (2002), social workers with lower levels of neuroticism are more resilient to stress and show better long-term job satisfaction.

Extraversion is characterised by high levels of social engagement, assertiveness, and positive emotionality (John, 2021). Social workers with higher levels of extraversion tend to be active, energetic, and socially engaged (Wagaman et al., 2015). According to de las Olas Palma-García and Hombrados-Mendieta (2014), extroverted social workers have a better ability to establish and maintain relationships with clients, which is crucial for successful intervention and building trust. These individuals also cope better with teamwork and have higher levels of work commitment.

Openness to experience refers to cognitive flexibility, creativity, and the willingness to accept new ideas and experiences (John, 2021). Agreeableness, often called compassion, reflects an individual’s tendency to be helpful, altruistic, and cooperative (Graziano and Eisenberg, 1997). This domain is crucial for social workers because their work requires empathy and understanding clients’ needs. According to George and Zhou (2001), workers with high levels of agreeableness can better handle interpersonal conflicts. In the case of social work, this can be predicted to provide better emotional support to clients, leading to more effective interventions.

Conscientiousness includes being organised, responsible, and goal-oriented (John, 2021). According to a study by Judge et al. (2000), workers with high levels of conscientiousness are reliable, systematic, and goal oriented. These workers tend to perform their tasks carefully and adhere to ethical standards, which are essential to ensure service quality and compliance with professional standards.

Musil et al. (2019) surveyed 729 social workers from state and non-state organisations in the Czech Republic. They found that the majority of social workers are agreeable (36%) and conscientious (29%). Emotionally stable (15%), open to experience (14%), and extroverted (6%) types are less common. The study also suggests that social workers with an emotionally stable personality type show the highest potential for applying resilience (56.3%). In comparison, types with the lowest resilience potential are conscientious (29.2%) and agreeable (33.6%). Social workers’ personality disposition and resilience are closely related, and their mutual relationship is increasingly the subject of professional research. Punová (2020) points out that resilience, i.e., the ability to adaptively cope with stressful situations, is primarily determined by social workers’ personality settings. The author notes that the personality types “conscientious” and “friendly”, common in social work, may paradoxically show lower resilience potential. In contrast, individuals with emotional stability show the highest level of resilience. These findings underline the importance of a deeper understanding of how specific personality traits contribute to the profession’s performance and the worker’s

mental well-being. At the same time, it is essential to perceive that personality is not a static category; according to Punová (2020), developing self-knowledge, emotional intelligence, and the ability to manage stress are vital tools for strengthening the professional sustainability of workers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research aimed to a) describe the connection between the personality disposition of a social worker according to the NEO-FFI and the social work they performed; b) compare the NEO-FFI results of social workers with the Czech population.

Quantitative data collection included the online distribution of the NEO-FFI questionnaire (Czech version Hřebíčková and Urbánek, 2001), in the form of a programmed web form according to the official questionnaire assignment. The result was displayed on the last page of the form, which was calculated according to the manual for the administration and evaluation of the questionnaire (Hřebíčková and Urbánek, 2001) based on the respondent's answers (i.e., calculating the raw scores for individual factors and then determining the relevant percentile of respondents in the population rating themselves as weaker in a given trait). The resulting percentiles (factor values) were stored in a database with the respondent's unique identification and sociodemographic data to evaluate hypotheses.

The obtained data were statistically processed in the SPSS.17 program.

The research group included social workers. 5,597 services were registered in the register of providers (August 2023). Based on stratified selection, a list of all social services was created according to Section 34 of Act No. 108/2006 Coll., on social services. Twenty representatives were randomly selected by drawing lots. From the websites of the selected services, either a public e-mail "for the service" was selected, or – if there was information on the website, especially for larger services – an e-mail to the person responsible for social services. 382 organisations were contacted by e-mail. 361 people participated in the research, and 324 answered all questions in the questionnaire. 86.1% were women, 13.7% were men, and 0.3% of respondents identified

as "other". The age group of the respondents' clientele was divided into three categories. Children made up 16%, adults 70.1%, and seniors 13.9%. As for the representation by the type of social service where the respondent works, the largest share (90) was made up of workers from other services (e.g., health, outreach, and others). The second most represented group were workers from social counselling centres (47), followed by workers from low-threshold facilities for children and youth (25) and social rehabilitation service centres (22). The least represented were workers from social therapeutic workshops (3), dormitories (2), and intervention centres (1).

RESULTS

Table 1 compares the average results achieved from the NEO-FFI questionnaire among social workers with the Czech population in the international research conducted by McCrae and Terracciano in 2005 and the Czech research conducted by Hřebíčková and Urbánek in 2001. In the study, the respondents achieved an average of $m = 42.8$ for "neuroticism", which is the lowest score in comparison with the two mentioned studies (McCrae and Terracciano, $m = 48.9$; Hřebíčková and Urbánek, $m = 50.7$). In the case of "agreeableness", the average score was $m = 66.9$, which is the highest score in the compared studies (McCrae and Terracciano, $m = 49.0$; Hřebíčková and Urbánek, $m = 49.5$). The third factor is "extraversion", where the average $m = 40.6$ was achieved, i.e., the lowest compared to McCrae and Terracciano's $m = 46.4$ and Hřebíčková and Urbánek's $m = 48.7$. When comparing "conscientiousness", respondents achieved a higher score than in the compared research (McCrae and Terracciano, $m = 48.1$; Hřebíčková and Urbánek, $m = 44.7$). In the "openness to experience" case, respondents also achieved a higher score ($m = 57.9$). McCrae and Terracciano's study showed $m = 51.6$, and Hřebíčková and Urbánek's showed $m = 47.8$.

Table 2 compares the results achieved in the NEO-FFI questionnaire among social workers according to the type of social service they work in. We used the ANOVA test, i.e., analysis of variance, for the comparison. According to the test results and the achieved

Table 1 – Comparison of average NEO-FFI scores in social workers with the Czech population

Factor	<i>n</i>	Neuroticism	Agreeableness	Extraversion	Conscientiousness	Openness to experience
Our research	324	42.8	66.9	40.6	65.7	57.9
McCrae and Terracciano's research (2005)	445	48.9	49.0	46.4	48.1	51.6
Hřebíčková and Urbánek's research (2001)	679	50.7	49.5	48.7	44.7	47.8

Table 2 – Comparison of NEO-FFI results for social workers by type of social service

Factor	Test result (<i>F</i>)	Achieved significance level (<i>p</i>)
Neuroticism	1.217	0.235
Agreeableness	0.925	0.558
Extraversion	1.421	0.106
Conscientiousness	1.024	0.434
Openness to experience	1.164	0.281

significance level, it is evident that the type of social service does not have a statistically significant effect on the result of the NEO-FFI test.

The influence of the age of the service users was statistically tested. Table 3 shows the results of testing the results achieved in the NEO-FFI questionnaire for social workers

according to the age group – which consisted of children and adolescents, as well as adults and seniors. For comparison, we used the ANOVA test. According to the test results and the achieved level of significance, it is evident that the age group of the service users does not have a statistically significant effect on the result of the NEO-FFI test.

Table 3 – Comparison of NEO-FFI results for social workers by age group of service users

Factor	Test result (<i>F</i>)	Achieved significance level (<i>p</i>)
Neuroticism	0.585	0.558
Agreeableness	0.427	0.653
Extraversion	0.366	0.694
Conscientiousness	1.763	0.173
Openness to experience	0.339	0.713

DISCUSSION

Comparing the averages achieved in the research group with research focused on a similar area revealed that, in the case of the research group, a higher score was achieved in three factors monitored by the questionnaire (Agreement, Conscientiousness, Openness to Experience), while in the remaining monitored factors, i.e., Neuroticism and Extra-

version, they achieved a lower average than in the compared research. The statistics did not show a statistically significant difference among the respondents within the age group of social service users, nor in the case of the type of social service. However, several studies indicate that the choice of work is related to personality disposition (de Jong et al., 2019; Wilmot and Ones, 2022). Respondents achieved the highest scores in Agreeableness

and Conscientiousness, where Conscientiousness mainly refers to a positive relationship to work and work performance. According to Hřebíčková and Urbánek (2001), it manifests primarily as pedantry and orderliness, but also workaholism.

In the case of the research group, the lowest score was achieved in the Neuroticism factor, which may be related to higher resilience potential (as several research studies have examined the relationship between personality traits and resilience) (Campbell-Sills et al., 2006; de las Olas Palma García and Hombrados-Mendieta, 2014). This is confirmed by Musil et al. (2019), where the authors further state that even in the case of the Conscientiousness factor, resilience potential is low (which the authors explain with considerable effort to meet their set goals). Lower resilience potential is also associated with a low score in the Extraversion factor. The results in the area of the Neuroticism and Conscientiousness factors bring interesting comparisons. Punoová (2020) identified that although the “conscientious” and “agreeable” types are most commonly represented in social workers, their resilience in demanding professional conditions may be lower compared to workers showing emotional stability. These findings are consistent with our knowledge of lower neuroticism scores in respondents, which may be associated with a higher ability to cope with professional stress. For these reasons, we recommend that further research focus on the interaction between individual personality dimensions and their relationship to the level of professional resilience in more detail. It is imperative to monitor the mechanisms that contribute to the development of resilience, both through education, supervision, and support methods in organisations.

The research was not without its limitations. These include the online questionnaire distribution, when the condition of involving only social workers could have been violated, and self-selection. It was a sample selection because the Register of Social Service Providers and its filters are insufficient for a stratified selection of respondents, and it is also impossible to evenly sample respondents from some types of social services due to the number of organisations (e.g., intervention centres). The last limitation is the non-inclusion of social workers working in public administration.

CONCLUSION

The study results show that social workers in the Czech Republic exhibit specific personality traits distinguishing them from the general population, especially in factors such as “agreeableness” and “conscientiousness”. These traits can positively influence their ability to cope with demanding work tasks and maintain high professional resilience. We found that neither the type of social service nor the age group of the clients have a statistically significant effect on the personality profile of workers, which suggests the universal validity of these traits across different areas of social work. This research provides essential data for future studies aimed at optimising the selection and training of social workers to increase their effectiveness and long-term job satisfaction. It underlines the importance of personality assessment in professional development in social work.

Ethical aspects and conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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