Original research article

Work-life harmony strategies of child protection authority workers

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Abstract
Introduction: The topic of work-life harmony of Child Protection Authority (OSPOD) workers is crucial, not only for their personal well-being, but also for the long-term sustainability of this demanding profession. This article focuses on developing a deeper understanding of the strategies that workers use to maintain work-life harmony, and provides insights into the role of organizational support in this process.
Methods: The research was conducted through interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) and qualitative semi-structured interviews.
Results: The results show that employees use a variety of individual strategies such as self-development, mindset, networking, time management and personal space for relaxation. They perceive support from the organization mainly through supervision, flexible working hours, professional training, and employee benefits. An interesting finding was that workers did not pay attention to the development of spiritual needs, which are an important aspect of wellbeing.
Conclusion: The study highlights the importance of systematic organizational support in the field of work-life harmony and recommends measures that can contribute to the development of wellbeing of workers and their sustainability in the profession.

Keywords: Child protection; Resilience; Social work; Work-life harmony

Introduction

Many researchers point to the fact that social work is a challenging profession (Beníšková and Punová, 2020, Dimmrothová et al., 2024; Nissen, 2020; Punová, 2024; Rose and Palattiyil, 2020). This is also true of the work of Czech Child Protection Authority (OSPOD) workers, whose work is one of the most challenging areas of social work. These workers are confronted with the complex life situations of children and families on a daily basis. This often involves serious problems such as neglect, abuse, domestic violence, substance abuse, poverty, or family conflicts. Every decision an OSPOD worker makes can have a profound effect on the life of the child and the entire family. This responsibility is accompanied by considerable stress, emotional strain, and the need to make quick decisions based on information that is not always clear or complete. OSPOD workers also operate at the intersection between different systems – they have to work with children, parents, schools, healthcare facilities and the courts, which requires a high level of communication and organizational skills. The prolonged stress and emotional strain experienced by OSPOD workers can lead to negative consequences such as burnout, decreased job performance, and compassion fatigue

(Campbell and Holtzhausen, 2020; de Guzman et al., 2019; Molakeng et al., 2021). In their work, OSPOD workers encounter traumatized individuals, which may lead to secondary trauma (Figley, 1995). According to McFadden et al. (2019), McFadden (2020), and there is an increased tendency for child welfare workers to think about leaving the profession. Workforce shortages in this field may threaten the provision of care to vulnerable children, making this issue even more pressing. Considerations on how to strengthen worker resilience are coming to the forefront. According to Punová (2022, 2024), resilience can be characterized as a dynamic process that enables social workers to adapt and achieve the desired wellbeing despite facing challenges related to their profession. Resilience thus depends on the interaction between risk and protective factors at different socio-ecological levels. In our research, we focused on selected factors at the microsystem level (concerning the worker) as well as the mesosystem level (factors related to the organization's activities). We are aware that it would also have been appropriate to focus on the influence of macrosystem-based factors (such as the setting of the child welfare system), but these aspects were not the focus of our research.

Strengthening the resilience of OSPOD workers and taking care of their wellbeing and professional satisfaction is essential, not only for their personal sustainability in the profession,

but also for the efficiency and quality of services provided. In the context of caring for carers or enhancing their resilience (Campbell and Holtzhausen, 2020; McFadden, 2020; Punova, 2024), the focus is on finding a balance between professional and personal life. Two key concepts that address this topic are work-life balance and work-life harmony. Although they may initially appear similar, their fundamental nature and approaches differ. Work-life balance is a concept that focuses on achieving a balance between work and personal life. This approach often sees the two as separate spheres in competition with each other. The main goal of work-life balance is to find a way to create a balance between these spheres so that neither sphere dominates and burdens the individual (Boiarintseva and Richardson, 2019; Clark, 2000; Greenhaus and Powell, 2006).

This concept is sometimes criticized for being too rigid in its understanding of work and personal life, where it is assumed that there is a strict boundary between these areas. In contrast, proponents of the concept of work-life harmony take a more integrated approach to these domains, assuming that work and personal life are not in opposition but rather can complement and enrich each other (Hill et al., 2007; McMillan et al., 2011; Ong and Jeyaraj, 2014). This concept emphasizes the synergy between these domains, where positive experiences in one domain can contribute to wellbeing and satisfaction in the other. Thus work-life harmony does not represent balance in the traditional sense, but rather a dynamic process in which individuals adjust their priorities and seek ways to integrate work and personal roles. In helping professions, such as work in the OSPOD, the concept of work-life harmony is particularly beneficial because it enables workers to find meaning and satisfaction in both their professional and personal lives. This approach reflects the fact that work in this field is not only a profession but often a vocation, which can be a source of deep satisfaction if it is set up correctly. It is for this reason that this article focuses on work-life harmony as a key concept for promoting wellbeing among OSPOD workers. The text focuses on identifying and analyzing the strategies that these workers use for work-life harmony. By these strategies, we mean the different approaches and practices that workers use to manage the demands of their work without negatively affecting their personal lives. The main aim of this article is to describe the strategies that OSPOD workers use to harmonize their personal and professional lives. The text is based on qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews with OSPOD workers in the Czech Republic. It will focus on specific examples and experiences that reflect their daily practice.

Materials and methods

The aim of the research was to answer the main research question: What strategies do OSPOD social workers use to achieve work-life harmony? The sub-research questions focused on the following topics:

- tools/methods/approaches contributing to workload management and work-life harmony on the part of the worker/organization;
- perception of their availability and effectiveness;
- perception of the need for changes in sources of support.

The research design was based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) according to Smith et al. (2009). IPA is a simplified approach to traditional phenomenological analysis, focusing on understanding individual experience and the meaning people ascribe to their experiences in a particular context. IPA was chosen as the research is directed towards understanding respondents' perceptions of their own experiences – which is the main strength of this approach. The analysis process involved several steps, including reflecting on the researcher's experience of the topic, re-reading the data, taking notes, identifying key themes, and looking for connections and patterns between themes. These themes were then interpreted and supported by direct quotes from the interviews. Thus, following the concept of Smith et al. (2009), a clearly structured IPA process was followed, which included a progression from reflecting on the researcher's experience to looking for patterns across cases. As part of this reflection on personal and professional experiences, we realized that we were entering the research with the assumption that there would be a greater blending of professional situations into the personal lives of OSPOD workers. We anticipated that respondents would primarily emphasize the demands of the profession in their statements and would find it difficult to maintain the desired wellbeing. In this respect, it was surprising to us that some workers perceived their work as demanding, but on the other hand, they also talked about its positive aspects. We are aware that our experience may have influenced the resulting analysis in that we entered the research with the assumption that OSPOD social workers experience similar situations to ours. Our expectations about the emotional demands of the work may have influenced the interpretation of respondents' answers, particularly if they were consistent with our own experience.

The research was carried out among social workers of the OSPOD, and the sample was selected through purposive sampling. The selection of respondents was based on criteria that included a minimum of one year's experience in the field. Family situation and number of children were also collected, as it is believed that these factors may influence perceptions of compliance. The research sample consisted of a total of 9 social workers (8 female and 1 male), from 3 different workplaces, aged 29–52 years. Data on gender, marital status, and length of experience were collected with the consent of the respondents, providing a deeper context for exploring the topic. The number of respondents was chosen following the recommendations of Smith et al. (2009) who recommend a research sample size of 4–10 cases for a phenomenological approach, allowing for a detailed analysis of each respondent.

The research data was collected between September and October 2024 using a semi-structured interview technique. Each interview lasted over 30 minutes and took place at the respondent's workplace. At the beginning of each session, respondents were briefed on the purpose of the research, its terms and conditions and ethical guidelines, including anonymization and the possibility of optional responses to more sensitive questions. The interview transcripts totalled 192 A4 pages.

Ethical principles were emphasized in the research, particularly through informed consent, which provided participants with detailed information about the aims, topics, and conditions of the research. Respondents were free to choose to participate and were assured that they could refuse to answer any questions. All data was anonymized to ensure that individuals, organizations, or their workplaces could not be identified (respondents were identified by abbreviations (R1–R9)). Care was taken to be as sensitive as possible during the interviews and in the subsequent data analysis.

We are aware that the research also contained limiting aspects. Although the interview questions were sent to respondents in advance, most of them did not become familiar with

them until the interview itself. During the interviews, it became apparent that those who had prepared for the interview in advance were more interested in developing themes and were more familiar with the nature of the questions, leading to richer data. We also consider the gender imbalance of the sample to be limiting, as there were 8 women and only 1 man among the respondents.

Results and discussion

The interviews revealed several strategies used by OSPOD workers to achieve work-life harmony. From a social ecological perspective, we will focus on the micro and mezzo system, distinguishing whether these are strategies used (a) on the worker's own initiative or (b) offered by the employer.

Work-life harmony strategies based on employee initiative

During the interviews, the workers identified tools, methods, and approaches to work-life harmony, which included not only the area of professional development, but also personal psycho-hygiene tools to help cope with demanding work (Scheme 1). Each of these aspects plays an important role in how workers cope with daily challenges and how effectively they protect their own mental wellbeing. The following analysis looks at these strategies in more detail, based on the respondents' accounts.

Self-development	Mindset	Social network	Time management	Personal space

Scheme 1. Individual strategies for work-life harmony

In terms of coping with professional challenges and improving wellbeing, staff spoke about personal development. This not only helps them to maintain and expand their professional skills, but also enables them to respond flexibly to the ever-changing demands in the field of child welfare, as discussed, for example, by R2: *"We like self-development in our office. We can be sensible to the topics that we need not only for the content of our work, but also just for the psycho-hygiene. We have to keep up with some materials, decrees, new procedures, and things like that. So, I'm doing a course in crisis intervention now."* Regular training and courses are seen by staff as an integral part of their work, not only providing them with professional knowledge but also helping them to better navigate legislative changes and new procedures. Thus, they consider self-development not only as a professional necessity, but also as an opportunity for personal growth that positively influences their daily work. Self-development can also take the form of deeper self-knowledge, for example through therapeutic training or other self-development programmes that help workers to better manage the psychological stresses associated with their profession: R1: *"It's definitely the self-development that just shows you another way and the possibility of some kind of rehabilitation, recreation, and that."* Overall, self-development is perceived by workers as a key element in the professional and personal lives of social workers, which is consistent with the findings of other authors (Lizano et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2019; Stanley et al., 2023). Regular education and reflection not only increase their professional competencies but also provide them with tools for stress management and burnout prevention.

For some workers, a crucial aspect in this area is their mindset. They consider it important to be able to realise that they have done their best in certain situations and not to dwell on past events that can no longer be changed. This way of thinking helps them to minimize the emotional burden and better focus on the next steps: R6: *"I had to … like … learn to tell myself afterwards that it's already happened. I'm just not going to do anything about it now and just… like … have it sorted out inside me. You can't change it anymore and now the most you can say is what we are going to do differently for what's now."* Within work-life harmony, the issue of setting boundaries is very important. These are most often associated with the client–worker relationship, but in this context the actual mindset is very important in separating the personal and professional spheres.

As R3 says: *"The mindset will do a lot. But that's … like …. things I think are up to each of us – how much work you take home. What they don't take, how they like drop it here, or don't drop it here."* Overall, the ability to work with one's own mindset is a key strategy for social workers, allowing them not only to manage their workload but also to separate work from their personal lives and maintain mental stability.

In relation to personal mindset, the workers also talked about time management, which helps them to organize their work effectively. Nevertheless, they point out that their field is very dynamic and they often have to adapt to unexpected situations that disrupt the predefined plan. While some perceived its importance primarily in the work environment, others felt it is also important in balancing work commitments with family responsibilities. As R9 says: *"You have to be able to organize things even within that work and that personal environment. It depends on how busy your agenda is. So probably more like that, just being able to plan and know what you're doing in the first place. But even that personal life is about constant planning, especially when it comes to childcare."* Overall, respondents consider time management to be an essential part of their work, but in their profession, it is not always possible to rigidly adhere to a predetermined schedule. Dealing with unexpected situations is a normal part of their daily reality, which requires the ability to flexibly adjust their work and personal schedules.

Workers considered self-care to be the most important strategy to promote work-life harmony, and this consists of setting aside personal space for rest and recharge. The statements revealed that workers focus on activities in the physical and psychological planes, while spiritual activities are neglected – even though they also form an important component of the worker's wellbeing according to Navrátilová (2015) and Stanley et al. (2023). Workers talked about different ways to recover – some prefer time alone: R6: *"When you work with people, you need a place, and it doesn't matter where it is. But where no one will talk to you – and let you live."* Workers also mentioned relaxation techniques and professional support focused on self-care: R1: *"You need to really relax in your time off. To know some techniques to relieve stress."* Workers find mental balance through physical activity. Being able to 'switch off' after a hard day at work helps them to regain their strength and cope with the emotionally challenging stories they encounter at work. As R7 says: *"Well, I go with my dog for example. I still relieve the*

stress of work by working physically most of the time afterwards. With the manual work, again, you don't have to think too much about anything." Overall, respondents emphasize that personal space for rest and relaxation is essential, not only for work-life harmony but also for their overall wellbeing, which supports the findings of other authors (Griffiths et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2019). However, as Stanley et al. (2023) point out, while workers agree on the need for self-care, they also need systematic organizational support in this area.

Overall, workers identified several strategies consistent with the findings of other researchers (Lizano et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2019; Punová, 2022; Stanley et al., 2023). An interesting finding, however, was that workers did not pay attention to the development of spiritual needs, which are an important aspect of wellbeing (Brown, 2023; Navrátilová, 2015; Punová, 2024). Spirituality can be helpful, not only in personal life, but also in professional life. As pointed out by Canda et al. (2020), spirituality is an important coping mechanism for stress in social work. The authors state that workers can draw strength from their spirituality to overcome life's challenges and search for meaning, which helps them to not only survive but also thrive, both in their personal and professional lives. The authors add that this spiritually sensitive practice can also help social workers better understand the spiritual needs of clients, which can help them support them more effectively in their stress management and search for meaning in life – and this is much needed. Indeed, as research conducted in the Czech environment has also shown (Punová et al., 2022), children and adolescents who use social services suffer from existential emptiness and a sense of meaninglessness. Based on these findings,

the authors recommend increasing adolescents' susceptibility to existential issues and a more hopeful view of the future. The question is to what extent they can succeed in doing so when they themselves are not sufficiently sensitive to the existential dimension of their wellbeing. As Navrátil (1998, 2015) points out, social work practice is contextually shaped in the current postmodern era. That is, workers' attitudes towards their own work-life harmony and towards clients are constantly shaped by their everyday practice. The question remains to what extent they raise existential issues with their clients in practice. Navrátilová et al. (2021) emphasize that social workers working in child protection should also pay attention to the spiritual dimension of their wellbeing.

In summary, workers use strategies that have also been highlighted by other authors. However, they differ in that they do not exploit the potential of the spiritual sphere, which could contribute to their work-life harmony. The development of this harmony does not only depend on the initiative of the worker, but also on the resources provided by the organization, as discussed below.

Work-life harmony strategies offered by the organization

The following section introduces the different forms of support that organizations provide to their employees to help manage workload and stress (Scheme 2). These measures not only contribute to professional development but also improve the overall wellbeing of workers, making it easier to balance work and personal life.

Scheme 2. Organizational strategies for work-life harmony

Flexibility in working hours is an important source of support from the organization, especially when it comes to balancing work and family life. Although working hours are partly flexible, they have their limits, especially in relation to picking up children from nursery or school. Some workers can adjust their arrival and departure times to facilitate the organization of their day, but not all requests for individual adjustments are easy to implement. R4 explains: *"Our working hours are partly flexible. We are required to be present from 8:00 to 17:00 on Mondays and Wednesdays, and from 8:00 to 14:00 on the other weekdays. But we can come as early as 6:00. So actually, if I can, I'll come early so I can leave at 2:00. I wouldn't be able to actually pick up the kids from daycare that many times."* One solution is part-time hours, but their availability is not obvious: R8: *"I think there should be more options because it's a struggle to get part-time hours. We do advertise in public that we allow it, but when it comes to putting it into practice, it's more about getting the team to accept it as a result."* In the search for the ideal situation, some workers suggest systemic changes, such as setting up a company daycare or playgroup, to help parents pick up their children and allow them to better balance work responsibilities with their personal lives: R3: *"In the future, it would help me and others if maybe my employer set up either a playgroup or a nursery within work."* Overall, flexibility of working hours is clearly a key aspect for the interviewed workers, affecting their work-life harmony and readiness to stay in the field. While

some opportunities for adaptation exist, the need for greater responsiveness to individual requirements remains a current challenge.

Another very frequent topic was supervision, which allows them to reflect on their practice and share experiences with colleagues. Supervision tends to be organized as a group, but some workers also have the possibility of individual supervision: R1: *"There is group supervision, but certainly if we wanted to, we know that we can have supervision just for us specifically."* An interesting finding was that some staff found the peer supervisions more helpful: R4: *"And so we have supervision here and I think that … sort of… our peer supervisions are the most helpful, where we meet, really with more regularity, twice a week, and we can actually say what's bothering us there. We can discuss the case there. Then you have the insight of like several experts."* After all, according to Wilkins (2023), viewing a situation from multiple perspectives is one of the main principles of supervision. One worker pointed out that supervision not only helps him with work problems but also with personal ones that may affect his work. R6: *"Within that supervision, we can talk about our private life. Because of course if we have troubles in our private life, it's reflected in our work life, so we need to be cool … like … in both areas. That's also in the work one, which reflects in our private one."* Although supervision should be primarily focused on professional life, according to Beddoe et al. (2022), particularly in smaller social work team settings, supervision can take

on personal issues. It is positive that supervision is offered to all workers. In contrast, Punová et al.'s (2022) research, which was also conducted in a Czech setting, found that not all employers offer it to OSPOD workers.

It was previously mentioned that staff valued the opportunity for training. It is good if they have a positive attitude towards it, but the organization's approach to staff training also matters in terms of its effectiveness. Professional training plays an important role in staff development and is therefore mandatory: R7: *"Every OSPOD staff member must complete 6 days of training per year."* What workers appreciate, however, is the freedom the organization allows them to choose topics in relation to their individual preferences and needs: R7: *"The employer gives us the freedom to choose the type of training. Like … according to our interest … or according to the work, what would be helpful for us."*

The last factor that workers consider important is employer benefits. Some included the possibility of home office, although they perceived its limitations in the context of working at the OSPOD – as discussed by R8, for example: *"I'm a proponent of not being able to do this job completely from home, but then again, Covid showed that somehow it could be done, so I'm glad for at least the home office loopholes, although of course the employer allows them, but only as a benefit for someone."* Other workers appreciated the financial benefits: R1: *"It's not that common, we have it as a financial benefit here just to pay for some massage or some spa, so we have it here about twice a year. Which could be more frequent, of course."* R9: *"There's over and above that, like a meal card, some … just money fund that can be used for leisure activities."* R8, who appreciates the possibility of taking sick days, speaks along the same lines: *"The annual benefit is now, I think, 18,000 Czech crowns. They recently put it on a card for us, and we can withdraw it. The newly added sick days are a welcome benefit – about five per year."*

To summarize these findings, it helps workers when organizations support their employees through flexible working, supervision and peer supervision, professional training, and employee benefits. They also appreciate the choice of training and financial contributions for wellness or sick days, but recognize that flexibility in working hours and the availability of some benefits have limits.

Organizations provide their employees with various forms of support to help them manage workload and stress. Key tools include flexible working hours, supervision and interviews, professional training opportunities, employee benefits, and limited teleworking. These forms of support are consistent with findings from other research (de Guzman et al., 2019; Griffiths et al., 2017; Lizano et al., 2021; Molakeng et al., 2021). However, upon deeper reflection, workers identify areas for improvement, such as the availability of part-time work or systemic measures to support work-life harmony. It is also questionable whether flexible working should be considered a benefit or a standard part of working conditions (as their institutionalised right). Research by McFadden et al. (2019) among Child-Protection workers has shown that organizational support is key to achieving higher levels of resilience. The results of our research showed that the range of employee benefits on offer varied between organizations, with workers also reporting overload and feeling that their employer could provide more support. Respondent 8 aptly summed this up: *"I use survival strategies."* As reported by Lizano et al. (2021), who looked at turnover in the child protection workforce, employers often underestimate the importance of looking after the wellbeing of their staff. Munro (2011) reached a similar conclusion when she pointed out the effects of neoliberal in-

fluences penetrating the social protection of children. She indicated that a lack of investment by organizations in the care of staff leads to alienation of workers, limits their autonomy, and reduces their job satisfaction. It is not enough to simply offer sporadic benefits; building an organizational culture in which workers feel accepted and have the resources to effectively manage the demands of their profession is crucial. Inspiration can be drawn from the concept of resilient organizations (Punová, 2024; Rose and Palattiyil, 2020), which emphasize not only the wellbeing of clients but also the systematic support of workers as an integral part of organizational resilience.

Conclusion

This text has focused on the analysis of work-life harmony strategies of OSPOD workers and highlighted the ways in which organizations support their wellbeing. The research focused on workers' individual approaches to coping with professional demands and the role of the employer in creating the conditions for effective work-life harmony. Consistent with previous research, we found that a combination of individual worker strategies and systemic organizational support plays a key role in the harmonization process. Our research revealed that OSPOD workers use personal psycho-hygiene strategies such as self-development, effective time management, mindset adjustment, and setting professional boundaries, which help them to manage professional demands while also maintaining a distinction between work and personal life. An interesting finding was that workers did not reflect on the importance of developing the spiritual domain of wellbeing. This may be influenced by the Czech Republic's historical experience with the communist regime, which suppressed expressions of spiritual life. This influence may still be reflected in the current concept of professionalism, which struggles to incorporate the spiritual dimension. Due to the systematic repression of religion, no tradition of a clear relationship between social work and spirituality has been developed. These realities may also be reflected in the current conception of professionalism, which still fails to grasp the issue of spirituality. The latter may appear less relevant or difficult to grasp for use in practice. We believe that the absence of a spiritual dimension of wellbeing amongst workers is a challenge – not only for the workers themselves – but also for organizations that should focus on this area as part of a holistic approach to the wellbeing of their employees.

Workers mainly perceived support from the organization in the form of supervision and peer supervision, flexible working hours, opportunities for further training and professional growth, employee benefits, and occasional working from home. Our findings were consistent with those of other authors who also identified these factors as key to retaining workers in the helping professions. However, in contrast to international studies, it appears that in the Czech environment, support focused on workers' wellbeing is less systematic, and organizations often perceive flexibility and benefits as a privilege rather than a standard part of working conditions.

Based on the results of the research, it is recommended to strengthen the systemic support for OSPOD workers in three key areas in particular: (1) expanding flexible working conditions, including the availability of part-time work for parents of children, (2) regular supervision and interviewing as a standard part of professional development and burnout prevention, and (3) a wider educational offer in the field of psycho-hygiene, including education in the field of spiritual devel-

opment, which can be a source of professional and personal meaningfulness and contribute to worker resilience and overall wellbeing. It is very important that organizations go beyond merely providing benefits and foster a supportive workplace culture that enables workers to effectively manage professional demands without compromising their personal lives.

Ethical aspects and conflict of interest

The authors are not aware of any conflict of interest relating to the above contribution. They confirm that they participated in the preparation of this article.

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