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Social work as ‘pest’ or agent of positive change: the accommodating and transformative aspects of resilience in the discursive stances of (future) Czech social workers

Sociální práce jako ‘škůdce’ nebo hybatel pozitivní změny: akomodační a transformační aspekty odolnosti v diskurzivních postojích (budoucích) českých sociálních pracovníků

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates discursive representations of resilience in the context of social responsibility and sustainability in social work. Resilience is discussed as a combined result of individual, interpersonal, and organisational efforts which should not only protect the individual but also aim for broader social cohesion. Data were gathered in a longitudinal set of focus groups with Czech MA students of social work at the University of Ostrava. A sociolinguistic analysis of discursive stances was employed to gain a novel perspective while linking qualitative micro-analysis with broader social implications. Built upon the principles of a social constructivist paradigm, the analysis unveils how the participants position themselves as respectable professionals while drawing on sometimes hostile discourses in their surroundings that misunderstand, fear, or denigrate their work. The ultimate objective of the article is to highlight the importance of discursive awareness and transdisciplinary cooperation that could help (future) social workers cope with negative discourses in the societal context which is marked by compartmentalisation and worldwide increasing discursive divisions in society.

ABSTRAKT

Tato studie zkoumá diskurzivní reprezentace odolnosti v kontextu sociální odpovědnosti a udržitelnosti v sociální práci. O odolnosti se zde hovoří jako o kombinovaném výsledku individuální, interpersonální a institucionální snahy, který by měl nejen chránit jednotlivce, ale také podporovat širší sociální soudržnost. Data byla získána v rámci longitudinální řady ohniskových skupin s českými studenty magisterského studia sociální práce na Ostravské univerzitě. K získání nové perspektivy byla použita sociolingvistická analýza diskurzivních postojů, která propojila kvalitativní mikroanalýzu s širšími společenskými důsledky. Analýza, postavená na principech sociálně konstruktivistického paradigmatu, odhaluje, jak se účastníci staví do pozice respektovaných profesionálů a zároveň pracují s někdy až nepřátelskými diskurzí v jejich

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okolí, které jejich práci nerozumí, dehonestují ji, nebo se jí bojí. Cílem článku je zdůraznit význam diskurzivního povědomí a transdisciplinární spolupráce, která by mohla pomoci (budoucím) sociálním pracovníkům vyrovnat se s negativními diskurzí ve společenském kontextu, který je poznamenán roztržitostí a celosvětově rostoucím diskurzivním rozdělením společnosti.

Introduction

Previous research has demonstrated that social work students grapple with conflicting values and ideological narratives, lacking effective strategies to navigate the complexities of discourse about social work (MacKinnon, 2009). This feeling of being ‘trapped in discourse’ can further lead to personal and professional insecurity (Carey, 2021), exacerbated by the compartmentalised nature of modern society (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001) and the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (‘VUCA’) world (George, 2017). On top of that, social work students and early-career professionals struggle with being undervalued in many European countries (Glumbíková, 2021; Langarita et al., 2024; Matthies et al., 2022; Punová, 2022; Wiles, 2013).

The negative effects of ‘neoliberal’ discourses and socioeconomic precarity (Garrett, 2016) have been extensively discussed in social work (education) scholarship (Collins, 2017; MacKinnon, 2009; Tsang, 2011). However, it has also been observed (Carey, 2021) that the practical impact of this type of research may be hindered by the abstract nature of critical theories, which governmental and management representatives hesitate to adopt. Therefore, to facilitate the adoption of critical theory findings in practice, the presented study takes a complementary, critical socio-pragmatic approach to discourse analysis (Blommaert, 2007) that offers more hands-on insights while drawing on previous critical findings.

Our method is qualitative, interpretive, and social-constructivist in nature, based on the premise of the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966/2001). We work with the malleability of experience through discourse that endorses certain ways of thinking about the world, thus influencing subsequent human behaviour (Blommaert, 2007). The general need to deconstruct unhelpful discourses (Fook & Gardner, 2007) and understand the socially constructed part of reality through meaning-making (Mathias, 2015) are established topics in social work theory. However, resilience research specifically remains focused on the individual-structural dichotomy, while largely overlooking the mediating aspect of meaning-making through discourse and interpersonal interaction.

Thus, our article draws attention to this gap and raises concerns about the unhelpful effects of some discursive patterns adopted by students and social work practitioners. Since these patterns relate to their professional ‘resilience’, our Chapter 2 first links the study to previous research and conceptualisations of resilience in social work (Collins, 2017; Hitchcock et al., 2024; Punová, 2022). Next, Chapter 3 explains our method and provides detailed descriptions of a tool novel in the field of social work: the socio-pragmatic analysis of discursive stance (Blommaert, 2007; Jaffe, 2009). Furthermore, Chapter 4 presents the results structured according to the constitutive aspects of stance. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes this study by discussing resilience within the context of social sustainability (Pavani & Ganugi, 2024), universities’ social responsibility (Godonoga & Sporn, 2023), and the need for more reflexivity (Glumbíková, 2021), interdisciplinarity, and broader (transformative) societal collaboration (Bromfield & Duarte, 2022; Dore, 2016).

Resilience in the light of social sustainability and structural responsibility

Expanding from cognitive psychology, resilience entered the discussion in social work scholarship in early 2000s (Collins, 2007). Thus far, resilience has been predominantly studied as a matter of *individual* responsibility (Hitchcock et al., 2021) and received scholarly attention particularly in the Anglophone context around the world (Carson et al., 2011; Collins, 2017; Hitchcock et al., 2024 for

the review). Our study adds a novel, discursive perspective to complement the relatively under-researched context of social workers' resilience in continental Europe (cf. de las Olas Palma-Garcia & Hombrados-Mendieta, 2014 for Spain). In the Czech context, research highlights the importance of helping social workers strengthen their professional resilience, as they face particularly low societal recognition (Punová, 2022) and distrust (Glumbíková, 2021).

Since resilience has been explored across disciplines and national borders, definitions of the concept vary. In this article, we understand resilience as the ability to *cope with personal, situational, and structural adversities* Collins (2017). Key *individual* conditions include stress, conflict, and uncertainty (Klohn, 1996). *Structural* challenges encompass societal factors like limited resources, excessive workloads, role strain, and burnout, while *situational* challenges stem from social work's nature, such as exposure to poverty, discrimination, or aggression (Collins, 2017). That said, critical research warns against focusing excessively on individual dimensions of resilience which may obscure systemic issues and increase burdens on practitioners (Collins, 2017; Garrett, 2016; Hitchcock et al., 2024). Resilience cannot be solely seen as an individual responsibility; it also encompasses organisational and societal dimensions, as social workers struggle with the pressures created by dysfunctional structures and injustices (Garrett, 2016).

Universities can play an important role in building resilience in future professionals (Hitchcock et al., 2021), while balancing extant labour market demands (Carey, 2021; Garrett, 2016; Langarita et al., 2024) with proactive transformation of society (Godonoga & Sporn, 2023; MacKinnon, 2009). Critical perspectives condemn the former (accommodating) approach for perpetuating injustice and supporting a dysfunctional system, advocating instead for a (potentially transformative) holistic perspective that values interconnectedness and relationality (Garcia, 2024; Godonoga & Sporn, 2023; Tsang, 2011). We take a mitigating perspective that universities need to balance both the economic value-cost ratio of their activities with their role as agents of societal transformation.

Resilience, in our view, forms an important part of active, *transformative efforts* aimed at enhancing sustainable development. *Sustainability* has been discussed since many decades across fields, yet refers to no common definition or set of measures. Following Basiago (1999), we understand sustainability as an organising principle for selecting alternatives at all levels of a system that lead to the alleviation of poverty, while promoting interconnectedness and equity in society. Furthermore, we see the younger generations as the driving force of such efforts (Sharma, 2024) that have recently been expanding from the traditional macro-social topics of poverty and equity to (inter-)personal topics of well-being, identity, or sense of place (Colantonio, 2009).

While the environmental and economic aspects of sustainability have received significant attention in social work, social sustainability remains relatively under-researched (cf. Pavani & Ganugi, 2024). Therefore, our study joins Bromfield and Duarte (2022) in advocating for sustainability in social work, including resilience as one of the pragmatic goals. We specifically discuss *professional resilience* (Hitchcock et al., 2024), while focusing on its *discursive meaning-making* (Ungar, 2008). We emphasise the importance of *discursive resilience* – social work practitioners' ability to navigate negative discourse in a socially sustainable manner. In higher education, this may involve sustainable human resource management practices (Lu et al., 2023) and initiatives to enhance critical discursive awareness, promote well-being, prevent dropouts, and mitigate burnout and unnecessary career changes among (future) social workers.

Method

Our analysis is based on a series of focus groups with Czech MA students of social work at the University of Ostrava. Initially, our data collection aimed to identify motivations for studying social work and to understand students' needs in order to adjust the programme to reduce dropout rates. As an analytical spin off, this qualitative and interpretative study seeks to unveil patterns in the argumentation of students in order to understand how they make sense of their studies and future profession. The main research question asks: 'What does becoming a social worker mean to the MA

students and how could the university assist in this process?' ChatGPT-4o was used for final language enhancement of the manuscript, as English is not the authors' first language.

Place, sample and data collection

Our research focused on full-time Master's students in Social Work who, having completed their Bachelor's degree, are qualified to practice social work in the Czech Republic. Most students come from the economically and socially vulnerable Moravskoslezský region, with a high number of law enforcement cases and unemployment rate (Czech Statistical Office, 2023). Table 1 below presents an overview of the total number of full-time MA students:

Data were collected through focus groups (Morgan, 1998). Before the session, participants were briefed on the research objectives, principles, and rules. The key guideline emphasised that all opinions, attitudes, and experiences were valued. The moderator followed the script in Table 2 below, fostering openness and diverse perspectives, while the assistant moderator took notes and intervened when needed.

The transcribed dataset comprises 214 pages with 53,150 words. Data collection spanned 2015/2016–2022/2023, with a break during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ethics procedures at the University of Ostrava were followed. Before the establishment of the university's ethics committee, the project received approval from the Dean's College. The decision was later reviewed by the Ethics Committee, which confirmed ethical compliance prior to the finalisation of this study (OU-101937/20-2024). No personal data were processed. The participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the processing and anonymisation of the collected data, and the previewed handling of the data. They were also informed about their right to withdraw from the research at any time. While all students were invited to participate. Participation was voluntary, with varying rates each year and a total of 86 students, as detailed in Table 3.

The sample size was not large and was not intended to be representative. Instead of aiming for representativeness, interpretive studies seek to enhance the transferability of concepts and inspire interpretations, thereby offering insights into a variety of perspectives and potential implications across different contexts (Bonache, 2021).

Analysis

Qualitative discourse analysis proceeded in iterative rounds. Initially, data were inductively coded for themes, to identify narratives in the transcripts. Then, a discursive analysis of stances was conducted. A stance (Jaffe, 2009; Park, 2011) refers to an expressed positioning (descriptive, affective, or normative) towards a topic, considering others' (real or imagined) positionings. The concept of stance thus comprises three constitutive components: the *subject* taking stances, the *object* of those stances, and the *positioning* taken with regard to stances of (an)other subject(s) or stance(s) towards (an)other object(s).

Stance, as an expression of internal meaning-making, does not merely reflect reality in the daily life, but also forms it (Cameron, 2004). Thus, in its socio-pragmatic function, stance aims to achieve something – persuade, protect, distance oneself, mock, etc. – within the context of broader societal relations, while mirroring, reinforcing or contesting those (Blommaert, 2007). Looking at what can be achieved through discourses on both the individual and societal level (Blommaert, 2007; Cameron, 2004), we focused on the social implications of stances (Jaffe, 2009), considering both the personal and structural factors (Blommaert, 2007).

Table 1. Number of full-time MA students.

Academic year	15/16	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21	21/22	22/23
Number of students	89	96	100	86	90	119	126	142

Table 2. Semi-structured focus group scenario.

1. What was your original motivation for studying social work?
2. How did it change during your studies?
3. What are your strengths, and what are your weaknesses for the future social worker profession?
4. In what ways have you found the study of social work enriching so far? And in what ways has it diverged from your expectations?

If you have completed your undergraduate degree and already have a more comprehensive understanding of the social work profession:

5. What do you find interesting about the profession? And what discourages you from the profession?
6. Can you describe your ideas about your future profession?
7. Do you have any expectations about its performance?
8. Do you have any concerns about your future occupation?
9. How do you evaluate the position of the field of social work and social workers in contemporary Czech society?

To our knowledge, the concept of stance has not yet been used in social work. Stance has no terminological equivalent in many other European languages than English, and, to our knowledge, has not been used in social work scholarship thus far. Thus, the present study introduces the discursive analysis of stances as a novel tool to the international social work scholarship.

Results

This chapter presents our participants' stances structured by the constitutive aspects of stance – subject, object, and positioning (with special attention to its misalignment among the subjects). The original Czech utterances have been translated to English. With reference to the social constructivist character of our study, we would like to underline that our findings reflect our participants' *perceptions* of reality.

Stance subjects – the active discourse agents

Commencing from the stance subjects, stance is taken by a subject who communicates something. In our data, most stances were taken from a position of individual students who took *I-stances* (and *You-stances* when generalising their experience). Other (reported or imagined) stance subjects were students as a group (*We-stances*), and subjects in reported or imagined *They-stances*: university teachers, social worker practitioners, employers/organisations, media, and laypersons (non-social-workers) from the students' personal milieu. We exemplify this on the verbatim text below:

Extract 1¹

S5 (2019_3): Well, it's the awareness among the clients, they're like: "That's not a good social worker, don't go to that one." It's interesting that-, I've heard that too– that this exists [amongst students], so, just (...) [we, striving] to pass as the good ones.

The above extract begins with a reflection on reported stances taken by clients (*They-stance: 'they're like'*), who purportedly advise each other not to seek help from a social worker who is not considered

Table 3. Participants by years.

Focus Group	Date	Number of participants	Female	Male
2016_1	04/19/2016	9	8	1
2016_2	04/26/2016	10	10	0
2017	03/07/2017	15	14	1
2019_1	03/15/2019	10	7	3
2019_2	03/15/2019	8	8	0
2019_3	03/15/2019	8	7	1
2023_1	02/27/2023	9	6	3
2023_2	02/27/2023	10	9	1
2023_3	02/27/2023	7	7	0

'good.' In the second sentence, the participant takes a personal stance towards this information that does not reference her own experience with clients (*I-stance*: 'I've heard'), followed by a collective stance she has taken on behalf of the students as a group (*We-stance*: 'we, striving to'), expressing a shared aspiration among students to be perceived as 'good' social workers by clients.

The identification of stance subjects in our dataset revealed an intriguing initial finding. While the target groups (users of social services/clients) were frequently mentioned, the above excerpt stands out as the only instance where clients influence the discourse about (the quality of) social work. More commonly, clients are positioned as discourse object – being discussed and talked about. This under-representation unveils that despite active research commitments to empowerment, self-determination, and collaborative solution-seeking at the department level (Černá & Gojová, 2023; Glumbíková et al., 2019), and a curricular trend towards more critical social work, these perspectives have not yet permeated teaching to influence students' discourse.

Another intriguing finding was how *students often perceived themselves as 'incompetent' subjects*. Many expressed low expectations of their abilities, either generally or in specific areas (like mathematics). This led them to choose *social work studies as a fallback option*, something close to what they originally wanted but couldn't pursue (such as psychology or law). Participants frequently framed their choice of social work as something they settled for, or that anyone could do, embodying the sentiment of 'losers are not choosers.' For many participants, there was not an intrinsic desire to become social workers; rather, they were influenced by parental expectations, the push from the labour market for any Master's degree, or simply a desire to maintain their student status while figuring out their future paths. Further analysis shows how this factor played out in the formation of discourse about social work.

Social work as the object of stance

Although our participants felt they were putting considerable effort into their studies and gained insights into the challenges of social work through their internships, these requirements were mainly acknowledged within the study programme itself. In contrast, the participants described social work as an undervalued profession, which was also discussed in previous studies elsewhere in Czechia (Glumbíková, 2021; Punová, 2022), in our data portrayed as *non-intellectual*:

Extract 2

S6 (2019_3): So I think it's such an under-appreciated profession that (...) some people don't know what it all means, or what it all entails, a (...) that maybe it's just sort of looked down upon sometimes. I've encountered that too, that people have wondered, "Is that something to study for? In higher education?"

Indeed, participants frequently discussed the lack of respect for their work in their social circles, reflecting a specific suspicion (in the Czech context, post-socialist or post-Marxist) towards 'intellectuals' who do not contribute to material production or create value:

Extract 3

S2 (2019_2): They just (...) find it (...) like, the humanities (...) that [...] when there's like not the maths, some numbers and some, like, engineering or something, they may not realise that here it's also studies (...) like the technical fields.

The term 'humanities' in this context comprise social studies, put into contrast to natural sciences and technical higher education that are traditionally valued in the steel industry region.

In contrast to this 'ignorant' view of the public (disregarding the value of social work and effort put into the studies), the social work students saw social work as psychically demanding and intellectually challenging. Consequently, the need for professional resilience was mentioned as something that distinguished social work from the traditional factory work in the region and even rendered social work more difficult in comparison:

Extract 4

S2 (2019_3): Like - with some of the target groups - like with all of them, but with some of them it's even more intense, it's just mentally demanding [...] And it's not like- ... that you- like in the factory- that you do your work, you go home, and you don't have to, well, in quotes "carry home" the work- so after all, the social work- even if you try to be resilient or something, you still think about it, even at home, right?

Apart from a simple 'not knowing' or 'not realizing' what social work is, our participants saw the *image of social work* as full of misconceptions about its character. The feeling of being 'ununderstood and undervalued' was previously identified in another Czech study (Glumbíková, 2021) and seems to be shared across the Czech professional discourse as well as the believe that the *media* is largely to blame for this situation (Punová, 2022). Our participants specifically compared the media representation of social workers to other care-centred professions (teachers, medical staff) who allegedly get more, and namely more positive, coverage in Czech media.

While our participants did not question the trustworthiness of media or limit their concerns to news outlets (cf. the focus in Nilsson et al., 2024), they considered the portrayal of social work in entertainment (movies or series) to be particularly influential. They believed that the image of social workers in films, such as the character *Zubatá* ('Death' in colloquial Czech) in the Oscar-winning film *Kolja*, was the reason for the distressing reactions they faced outside the university. One student reported being asked if she would 'become the b*tch that takes away children' from families, while another described fearful defensive behaviour:

Extract 5

S6 (2017): I often experience that when I say I am studying social work, mothers hide their children from me. Then they try to convince me that they're perfectly fine- (...) hygiene and everything.

This view of social work as patronising the families in childcare even had to be overcome by some of the participants themselves. That said, in the Czech context of social work, this distrust of social workers often acts as a stressor alongside the profession's low prestige (Glumbíková, 2021). The next verbatim illustrates the effect of such negative perception in a participant's change of own stances towards social work:

Extract 6

S7 (2016_1): For me, for example, what changed [during my studies] was that, like, I always thought social work was like a pest or something like that, just how it's always like presented to the public.

The above-cited student apparently went to study social work despite believing that social work is *harmful* ('a pest') to society. While this was an extreme case, it exemplifies the meaning-making process that may need to happen during studies and the hardship imposed on students entering the labour market with a changed perception of the value of social work that does not align with the societal discourse. This is particularly relevant for students who were not specifically motivated to study social work and lack self-esteem, as described in the previous section.

In addition to the negative perception of social work as intrusive, despicable, and non-intellectual, the profession was sometimes mistakenly conflated by the public with social (personal, physical, sanitary) care and was considered poorly paid. The topic of low financial remuneration was particularly prominent in the initial focus groups but receded over the years. By 2023, students noted that financial conditions had improved. However, the struggle with denigrating mainstream discourse persisted, aligning with a similar experience of colleagues in Czechia and other countries who regret the low income and low social status of their profession (Glumbíková, 2021; Langarita et al., 2024; Matthies et al., 2022; Wiles, 2013). Participants' concerns about the public perception of social work (and social work studies) continued to be a significant and recurring stressor, despite recognising positive aspects such as the ability to help people in difficult situations, personal fulfilment, and the pride of overcoming challenges.

Stance positioning and its misalignments

As outlined in previous sections, participants learned during their studies and internships that social work is diverse, challenging, and valuable for society. However, they also had to contend with stances in their surroundings that framed social work and its studies as simplistic and valueless, or even as having negative value. This paradox was accentuated by some students' impressions that their *studies did not help them to address this discrepancy*, which is an important message for the university.

Confronted with a combination of stressful aspects, participants adopted discursive positions that exhibited both *resilience* (the ability to cope with stress) and *resignation* (abandoning their initial aspirations). The authors note that it was sometimes difficult to decide if the reported pattern shows resilience or resignation, depending on the interpretative perspective taken. Some students, particularly those with a low perception of their abilities, reported considering quitting their studies for better-paying jobs that did not require as much work and stress, or shifting to professions with better social status (e.g. police or penitentiary services).

While some participants appreciated that their studies prepared them for social work practice, most positioned themselves as discontent subjects within a system they felt they could not change, only endure, thereby 'proving their resilience'. In the most extreme positioning, the participant in the excerpt below describes her stance towards the studies of social work as an unnecessary overflow of theoretical (research, academic) tasks, while rationalising it as worth enduring (resilience as an endured 'toll') for the future good of their clients:

Extract 7

S5 (2016_2): [...] they teach you that you won't like certain things at work either. I always have to just find something positive, that I want to help those people, I want to help those clients, I want to improve their life situation somehow. So it's just the toll it takes, and I have to go through this here, yeah.

In a similar vein to this notion of resilience as a 'motivational self-sacrifice,' other participants expressed pride in their accomplishments and their ability to soon complete their studies and assist in difficult situations. While these stances marked personal development, they did not indicate a desire to strive for systemic change or influence the discourse contributing to their challenging experiences. The manifested resilience was of the accommodating, not transformative character.

As we focus on the transformative role of studies and social work, our analysis further pays attention to the social implications of how participants' positioning misaligns with stances in mainstream discourse. The excerpt below describes a heated exchange during an internship, in which one participant challenged the professionals' approach to social work:

Extract 8

S5 (2016_2): [...] they say, "We're not paid for it, we're not getting the pay for it, we just do what we need to do, we just kind of like clock out, and go." And I say, "Then why are you doing the work if you don't enjoy the work, if you don't find it fulfilling?" "I find it fulfilling, but only within my pay."

The approach of working 'only within the pay' (which also features the recurrent discourse comparing social work to factory employment – clocking in and out of shifts) can be seen as a form of resilience that helps the practising social workers cope with their socioeconomically precarious position. By limiting their efforts to match their pay and social status, they resist systemic exploitation. Indeed, requiring underpaid and overworked social workers to perform more could be seen as systemic exploitation, as previously highlighted in critical theory (Garrett, 2016). However, the soon-to-be-graduate participant was rather shaken by the experience. She did not see this stance as an expression of systemic resilience but as professional 'burn out.'

Addressing the trap and indicating a possible way out of this professional impasse, the following last set of extracts features how the response to the perceived misalignment of stances changed over the time of our data collection. The effect of misaligned positioning goes from a *resignation* and

withdrawal in Extract 9, to a call for *personal action* in Extract 10, and eventually, call for a *collective action* in Extract 11:

Extract 9

S1 (2016_2): [...] I start explaining it to them and they go again that I'm going to support the Roma on the benefits, so I don't feel like explaining it to them anymore.

Extract 10

S1 (2019_1): [...] I tend to defend why (...) even if the person doesn't ask me, maybe he has no problem with it, but it's (...) what I think (...) that people could- that there could be more of a presentation of how they benefit from social work, maybe indirectly, even if they don't have personal experience of it, because when a social worker contributes to some social cohesion on a more reasonable scale, you could say, everybody actually benefits from that.

Extract 11

S4 (2023_3): I imagined that being at a university where people have the same major and the same passion, that they would be more supportive of what they were studying. That already at the student life level, that we would be more vocal and say we are here and we are needed and maybe the university could help us more (...) to go more to the streets and say what social work is.

In all three extracts above, the participants show a form of discursive resilience following their discursive misalignment with stances in public discourse. None of them agrees with the picture of social work in stances that they encounter in their daily life. However, the extent to which their resilience to hostility in other people's stances towards social work could contribute to the ultimate aim of sustainable professional practice which leads to more community well-being and greater social cohesion in the long run (Basiago, 1999; Kalenda & Kowaliková, 2020).

Overall, our last focus group in 2023 showed the most active stances and readiness to change the discourse about social work: promoting social work (studies) at a student job fair, framing it as something that enthuses and helps the society to move forward, or dismantling the stereotypes that social work is burdened with. That said, the disappointment about the prevailing negative and ignorant discourse on social work and studies and the perception of the need for more structural support remained.

Discussion and conclusion

Our interpretation of the findings contributes to critical discussions on professional resilience in social work (Collins, 2017; Garrett, 2016; Hitchcock et al., 2024; MacKinnon, 2009), focusing on professional resilience as a meaning-making response to adverse life conditions (Ungar, 2008). Furthermore, we argue that the discursive resilience of social workers should not only protect them but also foster broader social cohesion (Rice et al., 2022; Woollorton et al., 2015). Therefore, we advocate for applying sustainability principles to the discussion on resilience, which would emphasise interconnectedness and relationality, contrasting with the individualism and compartmentalisation prevalent in modern society (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001).

Our discussion of implications aligns with the necessity for strategies to navigate the complexities of discourse surrounding social work (Carey, 2021) and to establish a meaningful professional identity (Wiles, 2013). In the context of our data, public discourse often portrays social work as non-intellectual labour that can be performed by individuals without specialised competence. We thus underscore the need for the 'management of ignorance' (Lovrits et al., 2024) and emphasise its practical relevance in social work education and life-long learning. Supported by previous Czech studies (Glumbíková, 2021; Punová, 2022), our findings highlight a prevalent public misunderstanding of the aims and values of modern social work, and underscore the importance of enhancing critical discourse awareness.

Our analysis has further revealed that while students demonstrate knowledge and commitment to quality standards in social work, they are ill-prepared to resist what they perceive as hostile

discourse and the negative societal perception of social work. Their resilience in taking stances often exacerbates rather than improves the experience. Specifically, they tend to exhibit resilience in ways that raise ethical concerns, such as reducing their workload, or engage in unsustainable practices like 'motivational self-sacrifice.' At times, they align so closely with marginalised clients that they disengage from mainstream discourse. We consider this finding alarming, given that most social workers in Czech municipalities and social services seem to prioritise others' needs over their own and is associated with relatively low resilience potential (Punová, 2022).

This exposes a systemic issue with the accommodating aspect of discursive resilience. The accommodating mode of resistance allows mainstream discourse to perpetuate stereotypical views of social work and its clients. Our participants link withdrawal and hopelessness, worsened by socio-economic instability, to considerations of study dropout and burnout among workers. Drawing on these findings, coupled with previous findings that most Czech social workers represent the 'agreeable' type of personality that tend to put their own need aside when they feel the service needs it (Punová, 2022), we claim that educating graduates who would soon quit the profession, withdraw to societal margins or perceive themselves as sacrificed or simply powerless against stereotypes, is a personally, institutionally, socially, and economically unsustainable practice.

That said, the promotion of social sustainability through a more transformative approach to discursive resilience cannot rely solely on individuals. It should be regarded as a societal (educational) responsibility of institutions striving for greater social sustainability. As evidenced in our data, students themselves are increasingly advocating for structural support to foster changes in societal discourse. This trend may reflect a generational shift in expectations regarding well-being and sustainability (INSEAD, 2023; Sharma, 2024), alongside an evolving curriculum that has progressively embraced a more critical approach in social work over recent decades (Healy, 2001).

Thus, it is now up to universities and professional associations, such as the Czech Association of Educators in Social Work (ASVSP, 2024). The value of social work needs to be clearly defined through ethical codes, standards, and similar initiatives that establish a comprehensive and concise discursive agenda. Additionally, within the Czech legal framework, a new professional law currently being prepared by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs could symbolically enhance the prestige of the social work field. Implementing mechanisms such as national awards could also acknowledge exemplary social workers and promote the professional value of social work, moving it away from being perceived as trivial or even harmful. The managerial suggestion (Garcia, 2024) to shift discourse towards the aspect of thriving *society* rather than evoking the, often stigmatised, word '*social*' might be yet another inspiration liberating social work from labels of excessive control, dependency, and perceived freeloaders.

Furthermore, universities that recognise their key role in driving change could offer workshops on reflective writing, discourse engagement training, or collaborations with policymakers and media. Rather than simply reacting and viewing resilience as mere adaptation, they could teach how to actively reshape unhelpful discourses, while paying attention to the emotional and relational dimension of resilience and promoting reflexive practice (Lehman et al., 2024; Punová, 2022). Highlighting the discursive aspects of resilience, our study supports the call for greater reflexivity (Glumbíková, 2021) to help social work students and practitioners critically examine their roles, values, and societal perceptions shaping their professional identity (Punová, 2022). By reflecting on how socially constructed frameworks influence their meaning-making, they can develop a more resilient stance, balancing social inequalities and fostering sustainable social work practice (Kalenda & Kowaliková, 2020).

Ultimately, our study advocates for interdisciplinary collaboration to engage with public discourse (Dore, 2016) and emphasises the value of transversal knowledge from diverse professional backgrounds (Wooltorton et al., 2015). Social work, extending beyond a single profession boundaries (MacKinnon, 2009; Wiles, 2013), should integrate interdisciplinary training and stakeholder collaboration in education. In order to promote social cohesion and explain social work values, this collaboration should aim for managing 'public relations' or 'marketing' of social work. Ultimately, a greater

emphasis on social sustainability, reflexivity followed by discourse management, and trans-disciplinary collaboration could further help to create transformative structures and procedures aiming to prevent individual dropout and burnout, eventually leading to a positive social impact in terms of improved social cohesion.

Note

1. Transcription conventions:

S5 (2019_1)	Student number 5 in the first focus group in 2019
F	Facilitator
–	truncated speech
[text]	implied content
[...]	omitted text
(.)	pause.

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Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly.

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