


Risk Factors Contributing to Crossing Professional Boundaries in the Context of COVID-19 in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

Crossing professional boundaries in the context of Czech social work remains an understudied phenomenon. Additionally, the recent situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically affected work conditions and transformed social work practice. The aim of this article is to answer the following research question: *How do subjectively experienced risk factors affect the social worker in situations when professional boundaries are crossed and in the context of a pandemic situation (COVID-19)?* The text is based on the theory of professional boundaries in the client–worker relationship and also includes the perspective of professional boundary crossing in social work. The key conceptual framework is ecosystem theory qualitative research carried out in two phases via in-depth semi-structured interviews in the selected locality. Each phase included informers who were active as social workers in low-threshold centres for children and youth. The text is a reflection of the influence of external factors on professional boundaries and of the internal dispositions of social workers, on the basis of which the text offers practical recommendations for social work practice in three

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categories: social workers at the individual level, leadership and organisations, educational institutions.

Keywords: boundary crossing, child welfare, COVID-19, professional boundaries, reflexivity, social workers

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Introduction

Crossing professional boundaries in the client–social worker relationship is more common in practice than it may appear but it often remains unnoticed and unaddressed (Doel *et al.*, 2010). The relationship between the social worker and the client is a key component of the helping process, but it must have proper boundaries to be safe and bring about the desired change.

This text focuses on the factors that increase the risk of professional boundary crossing by social workers. The research goal is to answer the following question: *How do subjectively experienced risk factors affect the social worker in situations when professional boundaries are crossed and in the context of a pandemic (COVID-19)?* To find the answer, we examined the experiences of social workers in a low-threshold centre for children and youth, working with at risk youth. Focusing on risk factors may appear outdated since social work as a field is currently more focused on strengthening protective factors and empowerment rather than on analysing deficits and risks. However, we believe that from the perspective of improving the good judgement and professional decision making of social workers, recognising and understanding risk factors is useful if not essential (Taylor and Whittaker, 2018).

The Czech social system legally establishes social service centres for children and youth in difficult social situations. The aim is to help these young clients integrate and improve their overall situation (ČAS, 2008) by providing information and professional help. Services are provided in the centres as well as field services (Kappl, 2013). The target group is defined as socially threatened children and youth aged six to twenty-six years old, also called ‘at risk’ (Klíma, 2009).

We hope this text will contribute to a better understanding of situations when professional boundaries are crossed and we also wish to stimulate a debate on appropriate and effective preventive measures to create, maintain and regularly reflect on safe boundaries in professional relationships (Navrátil, 2019).

Theoretical bases

Understanding professional boundaries

Traditionally, professional relationships have been understood as a way for social workers to distance themselves from their clients (O'Leary *et al.*, 2013). Czech authors use a variety of metaphors to define professional boundaries, such as a 'divider' which helps workers to determine what is their business and what remains up to the clients (Kopřiva, 2013). In the Czech educational system, but also in the practice of social workers, a great emphasis is placed on setting professional boundaries. Social work students actively address this topic during their studies. Social work organisations then follow methodologies, codes of ethics and examples of good practice (MPSV, 2019). The issue of boundaries is also discussed in Czech academic literature (Kopřiva, 2013; Navrátil, 2019).

Within the worker–client relationship, boundaries ensure rules around sharing personal information, physical contact, communication style, etc. (Cooper, 2012). Professional boundaries are subjectively conceived by each worker. If the social worker cannot clearly determine the limits s/he is willing and capable of preserving, it is difficult to maintain safe boundaries (Janoušková and Nedělníková, 2008). Boundary work remains part of the professional relationship from start to finish, it is a substantial part of reflective practice (Schön, 1983; Navrátil *et al.*, 2021). Reflective practice includes 'discussion before situation' before, during and after the behaviour (Thompson and Thompson, 2008). Boundary-related challenges include for example pressure on time and stress, lack of information, different approaches amongst workers or client approach as manipulation. Human interactions between client and worker are very complex and the transference and countertransference are also present (Cooper, 2012). Social workers supposed to be aware of it and work in helping process reflexively.

Our study can be understood as a form of reflection on behaviour, intentional or unintentional, that represents a crossing of professional boundaries on the part of the social worker. Social work is specific in its need for quick complex judgements and evaluations of many multifaceted factors (Navrátil, 2019). Despite the care taken by the social worker to reflect on professional boundaries and to maintain them, situations may arise when boundaries do get crossed (Cooper, 2012). For a deeper understanding, one must become aware of crossing the boundary. Some authors argue that even small boundary transgressions are important to note, since multiple studies show that even almost imperceptible infractions often lead to a more serious violations (Galletly, 2004).

The consequences of boundary transgressions are varied. Apart from direct consequences, client motivation and trust may be undermined.

Failure to receive the support needed to achieve positive change and negative experiences with a social worker may influence the client's openness to the helping professions (Dimmrothová and Punová, 2022). The danger for the social worker lies in the loss of meaning, stagnation, exhaustion or burnout (Maroon, 2012). Other risks include merging, which is when the social worker identifies with the client's problems or dual relationships (Levická, 2015; Reamer, 2020).

Understanding risk factors

The maintenance of professional boundaries is influenced by several factors (Zubrzycki, 2006). Protective factors help social workers to act within professional boundaries. Simultaneously, risk factors make the situation more difficult for the social worker and increase the risk of boundary crossing. Risk always shifts the focus away from the present to the future, because 'the essence of risk is not that it is happening, but that it might be happening' (Adam and van Loon, 2000, p. 2). Whilst we consider it beneficial to inquire into the factors that prevent boundary crossing and positively contribute to boundary maintenance (Banyard and Hamby, 2021), awareness of risks helps to prevent problem situations and to create an appropriate organisational environment for social work (Baláž, 2015).

Our study is based on distinguishing between multiple layers of risk factors and we assume that factors influencing professional boundary maintenance can be situated in *micro*, *mezo*, *exo*, *macro* and *chrono systems*, or introduced by interactions between these levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Some factors are linked not to the social environmental aspect but to the person of the social worker (Glumbiková, 2020).

Interior factors (of the Self) are a part of the personal inner constitution or the personality of the worker as emotional instability or low self-awareness (Punová, 2022). The social worker and Self remain part of the social environment in which s/he works (Corcoran and Nichols-Casebolt, 2004). On the level of the social worker's Self, the key factors include identity, temperament and personal characteristics (Corcoran and Nichols-Casebolt, 2004), as well as personal and work experiences. Interior factors play a major role in reflexivity and skills prevent burnout (Ungar, 2004; Barbezat and Bush, 2014; Janebová, 2014; NASW, 2018; Punová, 2022). Self-perception is also important, as are one's self-valuation and self-respect (Satir, 2005). Interior factors also include motivation (Janebová, 2014).

The micro level includes individual personal relationships. The basis of the micro level is the manner in which the social worker relates to subjects of the social environment in his/her role including dual relationships

(Corcoran and Nichols-Casebolt, 2004; Cooper, 2012). This level includes family members who hold certain values (Satir, 2005), friends and close individuals making up the personal relational network (Říčan, 2004; Lacinová et al., 2016) and also the quality of relationships with colleagues and superiors.

The *mezo* level is composed of micro systems and their interrelationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Shelton, 2018). This includes the work environment, the management style, supervision or methodological help including ethical codex or standards of quality of social services, and the organisational culture including values and goals (Bedrnová and Nový, 2002; Lukášová, 2010). Community relationships create a support network for the social worker; if such relationships and the feeling of belonging are lacking, certain needs may go unfulfilled (Seligman, 2011).

The *exo* level influences the immediate setup and functioning. It consists of formal and informal social institutions. The social worker may not be in direct contact with them, but even indirect influence may have a significant impact (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Shelton, 2018). This includes informal social networks, security forces or educational institutions, etc. Significant structures are created by the accessibility of services or pastime activities.

Institutions and social structures can also be part of the *macro* system where all the lower levels of system interrelate. It is a broader spectrum that includes the political, economic, social and environmental arrangements of the society but also boundaries of social work itself amongst other professions (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Punová, 2012). We can also include culture and the educational and healthcare systems. It is at this level that the professional basis of social work is formed, as well as its status, aims, level of remuneration, etc.

The *chrono* system is related to the duration of the various factors rather than the size or scope of the system. It includes *situational factors*, which can last a moment or have effects within a clearly defined short period of time and *constant* factors which are long-lasting or permanent (Folkman and Lazarus, 1984; Cooper, 2012; Punová, 2012).

Understanding low-threshold centres for children and youth and national context

According to Czech law LTC are a form of social prevention service characterised by easy access, low bureaucracy, collaborative competencies and an inclusive arena. These centres provide ambulatory or field social services to children between six and twenty-six years of age exposed to socially adverse phenomena. This service aims to improve the quality of children's lives by preventing or reducing the social and health risks related to their way of living (Czech Republic, 2006).

Methodology

The aim of this article is to answer the following research question: *How do subjectively experienced risk factors affect the social worker in situations when professional boundaries are crossed and in the context of a pandemic (COVID-19)?* The aim is to support increased engagement of social workers in the setting of professional boundaries.

We selected a qualitative research strategy using the method of semi-structured interviews. The sample consisted of social workers at low-threshold centres for children and youth who work directly with clients. Respondents were purposely selected to include workers at various centres in a regional city with varied amounts of work experience. We chose the criterion sampling which involves the selection of sample based on some predetermined criteria (social workers in various centres in a regional city with varied amounts of work experience). We conducted a pilot interview, which was included in the research. The research was carried out in two phases. The first phase took place at the beginning of 2021, with seven respondents participating. The second phase took place in early 2022 with additional six respondents. Although the research was conducted in the Czech social and cultural context, certain aspects (reactions of clients and social workers in stressful situations, issues of boundary setting) may be transferable and applicable to other contexts.

Because all the research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, we also included the topic of changes in risk factors whilst the centres functioned under various public health restrictions. Phase II respondents were asked about this in the first interview, whilst phase I respondents were asked a year later, during phase II. Of the original seven participants, five replied, since in the meantime two had left the centre. The research was carried out with the agreement and informed consent of all the respondents.

A total of thirteen social workers (eleven women, two men with length of practise from six months to seven years, level of education—university/higher education) representing eight centres participated. The respondents are classified as R1–R13. The data were analysed using contemporary approaches to grounded theory according to Charmaz (2014). The open coding method was used along with categorisation and interpretation procedures on the bases of selective and axial coding. The project was supported by a grant from the University, and its ethical dimension was also assessed.

Research results

An important finding is that all the interviewed social workers had experience of crossing professional boundaries. Another basic finding was that during the pandemic, risk factors truly changed and social workers

were forced to deal with new challenges, which complicated safe professional relationships. We divided the interpretative part into internal and external factors according to the level of their influence. Finally, we divided the factors into specific categories and subcategories according to the area from which they arose.

Results from the area of internal factors

Knowledge and experience from professional and personal life

Subcategories: personal maturity, actual experiences with close individuals, work experience, education, theoretical basis of social work

Respondents said a very important factor is lack of work experience. As time goes by, R5 explained, 'it is not about a serious crossing but small nuances'. More experienced social workers can be more rigid in their approach. Another risk is education of insufficient quality in the field of social work, or even the complete absence of education, setting the stage for the social worker not to reflect on the boundaries of his/her roles. Further risk factors are personal immaturity and ungroundedness: 'I can perceive it within myself that if there is something unclarified in my own life, it becomes visible in my work with the clients' (R10). Unclear boundary setting in personal relationships has an impact on professional boundary setting. R8 mentioned that at times when she is in conflict with others in her personal life, she becomes emotionally engaged elsewhere and her thoughts wander. A social worker in a difficult personal situation has less capacity for reflexivity.

Internal setup of social worker?

Subcategories: long-term setup, life values, family patterns, personal difficulties, sensitive topics, personal boundaries, personal setup, personal characteristics, values, needs

The constant internal factors include the personal setup of the social worker, long-term setup and approach to life and work. R3, for example, mentioned that he tends to think things over and considers whether a particular step will be correct. As a result, his decision to act in a tight situation may come too late. The constant factor of personal setup, according to the respondents, is influenced by education and the environment: 'Sometimes I have the tendency to hug the clients... or to put my hand on their shoulder' (R9). The specific situation can reveal social workers' values, for example at the moment when clients are facing difficulties (financial, hunger, etc.). Social workers try to protect clients and make concessions. During the pandemic, there was a tendency to 'be present for the clients even more' (R9).

The respondents noted increased compassion and the need to support clients to the maximum during the unusual situation. Too much engagement took place when social workers took on responsibility for their clients and their needs. During the pandemic there was also an unreasonable degree of risk in the attempts to maintain good cooperation and to value clients' success, which was connected with the need for contact and self-realisation. Specific factors included personal problems and sensitive topics to which the respondents reacted inappropriately. An extra burden was created by the spread of the novel illness and conspiracy theories about the virus, as well as personally living through the situation.

Emotions, feelings

Subcategories: joy and relaxation, fear and anxiety, frustration and tension, sorrow, anger, a feeling of failure

Emotions, pleasant or unpleasant, are linked with all other categories. The most risky are joy with relaxation (e.g., joy at overcoming barriers in a relationship with a client) and fear: 'Fear of what will happen, if the client will break something or not, or if I will get beaten up or not' (R1). Fear appears at the moment when a conflict arises and the client acts aggressively. Further emotions are anger and frustration, when the client is difficult or obstinate or has been unable to change for a long time. Sorrow is an intense feeling, and according to R12 it is difficult to maintain perspective when working with clients in a very difficult situation. Sometimes social workers question whether they are acting correctly or experiencing feelings of failure. During the pandemic, the respondents reported more intense emotions, as they felt overwhelmed, pressure, uncertainty and were overall exposed to greater psychological stress in their professional and personal lives. The research findings suggest that emotions are linked to loss of control and can weaken the ability to work with boundaries. The most risky emotions according to the respondents are those unpleasant emotions and feelings that arise in reaction to an ongoing situation and are linked to personal experiences.

Results from the micro system level

Specifics of the situation and its ambiance

Subcategories: physical discomfort, unclear situation, conflictual situation, crisis situation, overburdening, pressing nature of the situation, composition and size of the client group, friendly and relaxed atmosphere, individual form of work

Social workers are negatively affected by such workplace factors as cold, lack of fluids or noise related to the client group, which can increase

physical discomfort. Unclear situations are risky, as they may escalate into conflicts (with threats, and calling the police). Situational specificity can be burdensome and involve time pressure, which lowers frustration tolerance and capacity for adaptation. R11 noted that time pressure leads to disempowerment: ‘When there is too much work, one is tempted to simplify things or to do them for the client, instead of him [doing them]’. The risk increases if situations arise that are not anticipated by the work methodology (R8). Risk factors also include individual contact with clients in private, which increases feelings of closeness and intimacy, and a relaxed atmosphere, which tempts clients to share overly personal things or to make inappropriate remarks.

Specifics about the client

Subcategories: sympathy/antipathy, difficult/easy client, grateful/ungrateful client, client uncertainty over boundary setting

Risk factors include shared sympathy, shared experiences and a good, long-term relationship or antipathy and low engagement. ‘I see some people so often that I almost consider them as my sister or brother...’ (R12). Related to this is the social worker identifying with the client’s life situation. The specifics include personality traits such as over-activity, obstinacy, loudness, aggression or manipulation. The client can also be easygoing, open or motivated. In interactions with such clients, social workers may be less attentive to boundaries or may experience a ‘blurring’ of lines (R5). Another situational factor is gratitude or lack thereof on the part of the client, who respond that the cooperation did not bring about anything good. During the pandemic these specifics became more pronounced and had greater influence on the respondents. As the health rules at the centres changed repeatedly during the pandemic. Respondents observed another risk factor that clients tried to transgressed boundaries more often: ‘Their world turned completely upside down, they were more focused on us, they demanded interactions more often and were more intense’. (R2).

Presence of co-workers and relationships at work

Subcategories: varying boundaries of team members, irresponsibility and inconsistency, team relationships and communication, presence of other persons, loss of personal contact with the team

Misunderstanding amongst co-workers and different personal setups are risk factors. When a team member is not sufficiently responsible and reliable, conflicts may result. Repeated concessions to clients are also risky for the whole team, because then the client is asking for concessions

from all team members. Another substantial factor is the presence of another person at the workplace. When co-workers have friendly relations, they feel more relaxed and guard their boundaries less. The presence of co-workers may also create the perception that one is not needed at the moment, and the social worker then spends too much time with one client. When a social worker is alone responsible for a large number of clients, a chaotic situation may ensue. During the pandemic the social workers experienced a lack of contact with fellow team members. 'It wasn't possible anymore to share anything at anytime as it had used to be. Our supervisor tried very hard and was very active and supportive, it just was different' (R9). For some time, personal contact disappeared completely, making it harder for respondents to adjust the functioning of services for clients according to the rapidly changing government regulations. They felt lonely and isolated.

Results in the meso system level

Characteristics of the service and organisational approach

Subcategories: low-threshold rules for services, specific rules for street work, culture and organisation, professional support, increase in individual work with a client

Respondents reported that boundaries in the youth centres were looser than in other social service facilities. They perceived risk and more insecurity in street work, where even fewer rules are set than in the centres. 'When we go to meet the clients, we must respect how things are done there. One cannot bring there the rules from the centre, it's a completely different set up' (R5).

In terms of the organisation, the structure, and relationships between different levels within the structure, is important. Risk factors include non-functional communication and lack of professional support in the form of interventions for the team, in terms of quality or frequency. It is very risky when the same social worker has two positions providing different types of services used by the same clients, as the social worker then functions in different roles. During the pandemic, respondents experienced risky growth of individual workloads and increased frequency of meetings with certain clients. 'We had fewer clients. When a client came, we had more privacy and more room. I perceive that we had more intimate contact' (R12). Professional boundaries were lower and the work was more personal, thus increasing the possibility of boundary crossing from both sides.

Results from the exo and macro levels

It is interesting that the factors on the *exo* and *macro* levels were mentioned only in connection with the most difficult period of the pandemic. During more peaceful periods the influence of these factors was not mentioned.

Influence of state institutions, external factors

Subcategories: spread of infection, frequent changes in government regulations, pressure to fulfil a certain number of interventions in service

The spread of the infection was an intense factor, together with the frequent changes of government health regulations. Respondents had to quickly react and multiple times readjust the functioning of the service. 'I was more stressed because there were many changes in a short time and that was a great pressure. We adjusted something and then we had to readjust it again' (R2). Respondents felt pressure and fear when trying to fulfil expectations for providing registered social services and were more prone to cross boundaries to support clients' activities in the centre. 'Clients stopped coming, then they began again... I was afraid we were going to lose them again. As a service we had fulfil a certain number of interventions otherwise it would have an impact on our future functioning' (R13). The pressure on social workers came from several sides and their fears were connected to the functioning of their social services in the long-term, not just overcoming the current crisis linked to the pandemic.

Discussion

The ecological perspective and the concept of social functioning are popular in current social work discourse, without foregoing the individual's inner world and its functioning (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1986; Kopřiva, 2013). Most risk factors have their origins in the area of inner setup and experiences of the social worker, as well as from the micro level of the proximate environment. Whilst the social worker interacts with subjects on all levels of the system (Navrátil, 2014). The macro level factors were very powerful at the peak of the pandemic, when they impacted all other levels, increasing the intensity and frequency of risk factors.

Corcoran and Nichols-Casebolt (2004) and Punová (in Punová et al., 2020; Punová, 2022) speak of interior factors such as identity, personality

and characteristics also mentioned by the respondents as part of their personal setup. The respondents agreed with theories (Satir, 2005; Dickeson and Smout, 2018) that lack of personal experiences is a risk factor. They further noted the significance of overall personal life experiences, ungroundedness and lack of self-confidence in relation to personal maturity. Emotions are a very intense situational factor which link with all other categories. The pandemic caused heightened sensitivity to and intensity of emotions for the respondents. Punová (2012) and Cooper (2012) note that skills related to working with emotions, and the methods of managing them, are key to prevent over-helpfulness or emotion explosion. The literature of the last decade has suggested that boundary crossings are related to insufficient development of skills such as reflexivity, the ability to keep professional boundaries and self-care (Dundelová, 2015; Dimmrothová and Punová, 2022).

At the micro level, the most important area is personal relationships (Říčan, 2004; Satir, 2004; Lacinová *et al.*, 2016). The social worker is at risk when dealing with a difficult personal situation and suffering from lowered capability for self-reflexion. According to Kopřiva (2013), the relationship between a social worker and a client is key in promoting the helping process, which is confirmed by the respondents in this study. Cooper (2012) lists specific risk factors, which partially overlap with our findings (e.g., problems arising from obstinate, manipulative, easy-going or motivated clients). Our study participants described that these factors could link with their own personal conditions or setup, but also with unusual circumstances (such as going on a trip). Although the literature about the micro level primarily addresses the family system (Holland, 2004; Možný, 2008; Matoušek, 2014), working team relationships and the quality of interactions are additional influential factors.

On the meso level, social workers may experience risk associated with the management style and professional care in the workplace (Lukášová, 2010). According to our respondents, the greatest risk factor in the area of professional support is the quality and frequency of interventions, as the internal factors of all the team members are at work there, as well as the micro level factors, which constitute the meso level (Shelton, 2018). During the pandemic, such support was insufficient at times when the workers most needed it.

It is more challenging for social workers to see where the influence of factors at higher levels reaches (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1986; Shelton, 2018). During the pandemic, a new situation arose and workers reflected on the influence of these levels, in contrast to the more calm periods. They noted intense influence of risk factors such as frequent changes of government regulations, which caused stress and uncertainty, and pressure to achieve a certain number of service interventions.

Limits

Whilst our original design was to carry out semi-structured interviews face to face, we were forced by the government health regulations to use distance methods. The distance format was not as binding for the respondents and they changed interview times, which caused delays in the research. The online platform could also negatively influence the attention level and the desire to actively participate and develop the discussed topic, which put greater demands on the interviewers.

Following our qualitative strategy, we chose the sample intentionally and the respondents all worked in a specific area of social work in a particular location (a low-threshold centre for children and youth). There is therefore only limited applicability of the research results to other populations. On the other hand, we gained a noteworthy insight into this particular segment of social work. During analysis, we realised that the pandemic brought attention to new risks, whilst some 'traditional' risk factors may have been overlooked due to the urgency of the crisis situation and related regulations, although such factors remained present.

Recommendations for practice

Based on the findings we formulated the recommendations for practice, reported in [Table 1](#), which can be helpful in preventing boundary crossings, especially in difficult or nonstandard situations such the COVID-19 pandemic. We classified the recommendations according to those who would benefit from them. Many of the findings are consistent with the literature on setting professional boundaries in social work. These recommendations may inspire social workers who want to work with professional boundaries, and can be adjusted according to their needs, the needs of the team or organisation and within the range of options available to them.

Conclusions

The key theme of this article is risk factors that may influence light professional boundary crossing by social workers with clients. The main goal of the research was to understand how the subjectively experienced risk factors affect the social worker in general but also specifically in the context of a pandemic (COVID-19). This goal was reached via qualitative interviews with thirteen social workers from several low-threshold centres for children and youth in one geographical area.

The research results showed that in calm periods the majority of risk factors originate from the micro level or are internal. Under

Table 1. Recommendations for practice

Category	Recommendation	Description
Social workers at the individual level	Sufficient time and space for self-care.	Social workers are sometimes overburdened and feel great fatigue, which decreases their ability to concentrate and work with boundaries. It is imperative that social workers allot enough time for self-care and manage to dissociate their professional and personal lives (also see: Matoušek, 2013)
	Take advantage of supervision for reflection of personal setup.	Situations with heightened risk of crossing professional boundaries can reveal to a great extent the personal setup of the social worker. This recommendation encourages effective use of supervision to stimulate reflection on this internal setup and its functioning vis-à-vis client relationships (also see: Kopřiva, 2013).
	Develop skills for work with emotions.	Emotions are a common and highly intense risk factor. Social workers should not suppress emotions but express them in a suitable manner and know how to work with their emotions. To develop this skill, one may enrol in course of work with emotions or seek long-term professional support.
	Work on one's own grounding and increase confidence.	Beginners in social work feel insecure in the work environment and don't have clear personal boundaries, which influences the formation of professional boundaries and work with them. It is possible to take advantage of professional support in the form of counselling or therapy to improve grounding and increase confidence.
Leadership and organisations	Develop methods for intervention meetings and support for leaders.	Intervisions, which reflect micro level factors, have been perceived as a risk factor. In order to ensure quality and regularity, it may be helpful to develop a methodology of interventions and ensure support for supervisors who lead interventions.
	Deepen the skills of workers in individual work.	Professional boundary crossing takes place during intense individual work in the absence of another social worker. Development of skills for individual client work and the ability to work with professional boundaries in the form of a course and long-term professional support may be supportive.

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Category	Recommendation	Description
Educational institutions	Support good relationships in work team.	Team relationships are risky when the team members are too diverse and many conflicts arise. The recommendation is aimed at strengthening good relations between colleagues through teambuilding and team supervision.
	Expand the possibility of gaining practical experience.	Lack of practical experience is a risk for social workers. It may be beneficial to include practical courses in the curriculum for students, increasing the number of hours for practicum or extending the capacity for teaching professional boundary work.
	Develop knowledge and abilities at the macro level of social work.	The social worker and social work are exposed to the influences of risk factors at all levels of the social environment, although the less proximate levels are often less reflected. It may be fruitful to expand the education of critical social work and the systems perspective, so that social workers gain better insight into the influence of the macro level, factors which influence their work substantially and with which they may cooperate (also see: Cooper, 2012).

extraordinary conditions, it is more difficult for social workers to manage macro level factors, which influence all the others. Our respondents reported an increase in frequency and intensity of risk factors during the pandemic. From the point of view of ecosystems theory ([Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1986](#); [Shelton, 2018](#)), they noted factors arising from all levels of the system, as well as internal factors, all to various degrees.

Both internal and external factors play a role boundary crossing. The constant internal factors of the social worker often enter the situation, such as his/her set up or experiences in both personal and professional areas, which may bring to the surface or intensify the impulse (factor) arising from the environment. Reactions to the impulse are accompanied by internal situational factors, emotions, which are connected with the constant internal factors.

The most frequent impulses coming from the micro level of the system are one-off or repeated situational factors. Gradually becoming constant factors, transformed into experience and translated into the interior setup, they also accumulate (often coexisting together) with internal

constant factors in the situation of boundary crossing. These factors include specificities on the part of the client, such as difficulties or levels of motivation and sympathy, an unclear specific situation or individual work, the presence of others at the workplace, and relationships with others.

On the meso level we found mainly constant factors such as professional support (the highest risk is associated with the quality and frequency of interventions) and organisational culture. The factors to a great degree overlap with the micro level, but internal factors are present at this level, too, such as the internal setup of the subjects taking part in creating organisational culture and organisational framework of professional support.

Factors on the exo and macro levels were reflected especially under extraordinary conditions, whilst during calm periods they remained unreflected in a deeper way. Under some conditions, however, according to the respondents, they have great influence on all other levels of the system and on internal factors, and thus increase the risk of professional boundary crossings. During the COVID-19 pandemic this concerned specifically the spread of the disease and frequent changes in government regulations.

On the basis of our findings, recommendations were formulated for improving work with professional boundaries in demanding, nonstandard situations, which are directed to social workers, superiors and organisations as well as educational institutions. We hope they can be an inspiration for developing best practices.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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