

SUBJECTIVE AND ORGANIZATIONAL RISK FACTORS OF OCCUPATIONAL BURNOUT AMONG CREATIVE WORKERS IN THE DESIGN INDUSTRY

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Summary. Aim. Study group and tools. The study group included 80 people (40 women and 40 men) involved in creative work. The following tools were used: the Burnout Questionnaire (LBQ), the Coping with Stressful Situations Questionnaire (CISS), and the Subjective Work Assessment Questionnaire (KSOP). **Results.** The research results indicate an average level of stress and burnout. Increased levels of psychophysical exhaustion, disappointment, and lack of professional effectiveness were observed in relation to stressful factors, such as lack of awards at work, a sense of uncertainty caused by the organization of work, a heightened sense of responsibility and social contacts. **Conclusions.** Social interactions emerged as a particularly salient stress factor among women, constituting the sole gender-related difference in perceived stress levels. Additionally, women were found to more frequently utilize avoidance-focused and emotion-focused coping styles, while men tended to prefer task-focused coping strategies.

Keywords: organizational stress, coping with stress, occupational burnout, creative work, design industry employees

Introduction

Occupational burnout is among the contextual threats of the 21st century that professionally active individuals must contend with, irrespective of their profession, job position, or employment status. The Covid-19 pandemic, which took the world by surprise between 2020 and 2022, exacerbated the risk of developing burnout across numerous industries, leading to increased general interest in safeguarding the health of the workforce (Maslach & Leiter, 2021; Schaufeli, 2021). Consistent with the dominant theoretical and research paradigm, burnout arises from a mismatch between

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the individual and their work (Maslach & Leiter, 2005, 2021; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Of significance in this regard is the balance of employee resources and the work environment. When job demands are balanced by organizational resources, individuals will utilize them and be capable of achieving goals, particularly when complemented by personal resources. Początek formularza

The combination of insufficient workplace resources with a lack of personal resources significantly increases the likelihood of inevitable burnout. (Demerouti et al., 2001). According to current knowledge, a necessary condition for the development of burnout is the experience of chronic workplace stress. Psychosocial factors in the work environment now pose the greatest risk to health deterioration and occupational burnout. These factors include, among others: high work pace, high demands, lack of control over the course of work, lack of awards, work-life conflict, and organizational uncertainty. (Waszkowska, Wężyk, & Merecz, 2013). Coping responses are the means by which individuals deal with stress, and this factor is considered a significant modifier of the stress transaction. (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Cox, Griffiths, & Rial-Gonzales, 2000, 2016). A professional group that is rarely explored in terms of burnout risk comprises employees engaged in creative activities, which aim to create something new. There are four domains of creativity: science, art, invention, and public activity. (Nęcka, 2012).

The social environment exerts a significant influence on the development of creativity, and its stressfulness can either hinder or degrade creativity. It has been demonstrated that prolonged organizational stress associated with time pressure and external pressures can lead to a suppression of motivation, creative abilities, and result in exhaustion and disengagement from work, which can be detrimental not only to the individual but also to the entire organization (Haynes & Love, 2004; Hill et al., 2014; Kuśpit, 2004, 2021; Mróz, Chudzicka-Czupala, & Kuśpit, 2017; Nęcka, 1987).

There is research indicating a relationship between creative attitude and coping style. Individuals with a higher level of creative attitude are more likely to employ a task-focused coping style, while those with reproductive attitudes prefer an emotion-focused coping style (Popek 2001; Kuśpit 2019). Designers, inventors, and engineers in their work are guided by pragmatic values. If their work, in addition to its practical value, leads to the creation of something new, such work exhibits the characteristics of a creative process. It is precisely to representatives of the creative design industry that this research is dedicated.

Method

Research Problem and Objectives

The research problem entails exploring selected risk factors of occupational burnout among designers engaged in creative work. The specific aim of the study is to examine the relationships between stress, coping styles, and burnout within the investigated population. The following research questions have been formulated:

1. What level of occupational burnout do the surveyed designers present?
2. What is the stressfulness of the work conditions in the examined sample?
3. What coping styles do the surveyed individuals employ?
4. What are the relationships between stress, coping styles, and burnout in the studied sample?

Participants

The study included a group of designers ($N = 80$) performing creative work in selected areas of applied art such as graphics, advertising photography, illustration, drawing, sculpture, creating works in the field of a new brand or image, product promotion, advertising, copy-writing as well as broadly publishing illustration, including the creation of comic book characters. In order to check whether gender differentiates the level of the tested variables, the subjects were divided into two groups: women ($n = 40$) and men ($n = 40$). The average age of the respondents was 36 years ($SD = 7.61$), 21% of the respondents had secondary education, and 79% of the respondents had higher education. The respondents were informed about the purpose of the research and assured of their anonymity. Each respondent gave informed consent to participate, which consisted of providing written answers to several questionnaires. The average examination time was 45 minutes, after which the full set of completed materials was handed over to the person conducting the examination.

Research tools

The study was conducted using the following tools:

Link Burnout Questionnaire (LBQ) created by Massimo Santinello (2008) in the Polish adaptation by Jaworowska (2014), consisting of 24 items describing the frequency of specific feelings of a person towards professional work on a 6-point scale, where point 1 means „never”, and 6 means „every day”. The questionnaire makes it possible to diagnose four dimensions of professional burnout: psychophysical exhaustion, lack of commitment to professional relationships, lack of professional effectiveness and disappointment. Cronbach’s alpha indicators for the tool are satisfactory and range between .70 and .84 except for one dimension: lack of professional effectiveness, where the indicator is .63. The tool has ten standards developed for professional groups such as teachers, therapists, nurses, doctors, uniformed services and for the comparison group: IT specialists, engineers, accountants (Jaworowska, 2014).

Questionnaire for Coping with Stressful Situations (CISS) by Endler and Parker (1990) consists of 48 statements specifying the behaviors that people under the influence of stress may undertake. The subjects respond to each of them on a 5-point frequency scale, where 1 means „never” and 5 means „very often”. The tool distinguishes three styles of coping with stress: a task-focused style (looking for solutions to the problem, focusing on the task, an emotion-focused style (directing attention

to one's own emotions and reducing them) and an avoidance-focused style (diverting attention from the problem and sources of stress). The reliability of the CISS questionnaire for the above-mentioned scales is satisfactory, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient ranges from .72 to .92 (Endler Parker, 1990).

The Subjective Work Assessment Questionnaire (KSOP) by Dudek and colleagues (2004) is used to diagnose both the general sense of organizational stress and individual stressors, such as a sense of mental burden related to the complexity of work, lack of awards, a feeling of uncertainty related to the organization of work, social contacts, sense of threat, physical nuisance, unpleasant working conditions, lack of control, lack of support and sense of responsibility. The tool consists of 57 statements to which the respondent responds on a five-point response scale (from 1 – „the feature does not exist, it does not apply to my job position” to 5 – „it irritates me all the time at work, and I even get angry about it at work”). Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient is satisfactory and amounts to .84 (Dudek et al., 2004).

Data analysis methods

The data were analyzed using SPSS Statistics version 26. First, descriptive statistics of the studied variables were performed to check whether the results were normally distributed. At this stage, information about the average results of each variable was obtained. The normality of distribution was tested using Shapiro-Wilk tests. To verify the hypotheses, the Student's t test was used for two independent samples: women and men, checking for statistically significant differences between groups at the significance threshold of $p \leq .05$. The next step was to check the strength and sign of the correlation between each pair of studied variables. Analyses of correlations were performed using the Pearson r correlation coefficient.²

Results

The intensity of the studied variables in the sample

The average burnout scores were: for the psychophysical exhaustion scale $M = 20.99$ ($SD = 3.73$), for lack of involvement in relationships $M = 19.94$ ($SD = 4.54$), for the sense of professional lack of effectiveness $M = 16.88$, ($SD = 5.59$) and for disappointment $M = 17.71$ ($SD = 5.53$). All the above results correspond to sten 7 and represent the upper limit of average results. Then, *the results of the subjective sense of stress* in the study sample were analyzed. The general sense of stress of the respondents

² The source data was collected as part of a master's seminar conducted by the author who acted as a diploma thesis supervisor (Sowala, G. *Subjective and Organizational Risk Factors of Burnout Among Creative Workers in the Project Industry*. Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Gdańsk).

($M = 94.29$; $SD = 14.82$) indicates the upper limit of the moderate level (sten 6), while its dimensions such as: social contacts ($M = 10.84$; $SD = 3.08$), sense of uncertainty caused by work organization ($M = 18.51$; $SD = 5.14$), lack of rewards ($M = 15.82$; $SD = 5.04$), sense of mental burden related to the complexity of work ($M = 19.06$; $SD = 3.64$) sense of responsibility ($M = 8.12$; $SD = 2.21$) and lack of support ($M = 5.18$; $SD = 1.83$) were assessed by the respondents as highly stressful (Dudek et al., 2004).

The next step was to determine the frequency of styles of coping with stress used by the respondents. Overall, the most frequently used style in the sample turned out to be avoidance-focused ($M = 47.89$; $SD = 10.80$) and corresponds to sten 7 - a high result. The remaining styles: focused on emotions ($M = 49.56$; $SD = 9.82$) and focused on the task ($M = 57.98$; $SD = 8.17$) constitute a moderate level (sten 6).

In order to check whether gender differentiates the results of each tested variable in terms of its individual dimensions, a comparative analysis was performed in the group of women and men, which is presented in Table 1. Thus, detailed comparative analyses of each dimension of burnout indicate that the level of psychophysical exhaustion and the sense of professional ineffectiveness do not differ significantly between the groups of women and men. However, gender statistically significantly differentiates two dimensions of burnout: lack of commitment to relationships and disappointment, the manifestations of which are experienced more strongly by men. In turn, the results of the comparative analyses regarding the sense of stress indicate that only the social contacts as stressful work condition significantly differs between the women and men studied. It turned out to be a significantly more stressful factor in women's experience. The next results of the comparative analysis regarding the frequency of styles of coping with stress by gender. Women and men differ statistically significantly in the frequency of coping styles used. Men use a task-focused style more often ($M = 6.90$, $p < .001$). In turn, women use non-confrontational styles significantly more often, such as those focused on emotions ($M = 7.38$, $p < .001$) and avoidance ($M = 7.68$, $p < .001$).

Table 1. Comparative analysis of the studied variables for women and men

Variables	Women ($n = 40$)		Men ($n = 40$)		<i>t-Student</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Psychophysical exhaustion	7.25	1.15	7.35	1.51	-.33	.74
Lack of commitment	6.03	1.82	8.07	1.73	-5.17	<.001***
Lack of effectiveness	7.08	2.81	7.55	2.14	-.85	.40
Disappointment	6.65	1.98	7.50	1.60	-2.11	.04*
Mental burden	19.4	4.00	18.73	3.26	.83	.41
No awards	15.07	4.75	16.58	5.28	-1.34	.19
Feeling of uncertainty	18.27	5.67	18.75	4.60	-.41	.68

cont. tab. 1

Variables	Women (<i>n</i> = 40)		Men (<i>n</i> = 40)		<i>t</i> -Student	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Social contacts	11.55	3.23	10.12	2.78	2.11	.04*
Sense of danger	8.03	2.37	8.22	2.03	.41	.69
Physical nuisance	1.45	.81	1.70	.94	-1.27	.21
Unpleasant work conditions	1.57	.81	1.43	.71	.88	.38
Lack of control	5.65	1.41	5.45	1.38	.64	.52
Lack of support	5.10	1.79	5.25	1.89	-.36	.72
Sense of responsibility	7.95	2.23	8.30	2.21	-.71	.48
Sense of stress – Total	94.05	16.84	94.53	12.7	-.14	.89
Task-focused style	4.53	1.32	6.90	1.61	-7.20	<.001***
Emotion-focused style	7.38	1.21	5.30	1.91	5.80	<.001***
Avoidance-focused style	7.68	1.64	5.30	2.45	5.09	<.001***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 2. Correlations between the subjective sense of stress and burnout

Variables	Psycho-physical exhaustion	Lack of commitment to relationships	Lack of professional effectiveness	Disappointment
Mental burden	.26*	.02	.18	.20
No awards	.51***	.19	.15	.54***
Feeling of uncertainty	.34**	.26*	.49***	.34**
Social contacts	.10	.13	.46***	.28*
Sense of danger	-.17	-.05	-.09	.01
Physical nuisance	-.03	-.07	.00	.05
Unpleasant work conditions	.13	-.06	.12	.01
Lack of control	-.22*	-.18	-.40***	-.24*
Lack of support	.05	.28	.39	.18
Sense of responsibility	.13	.14	.42	.34
General feeling of stress	.36	.21	.43	.46

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Correlation analysis of the studied variables

The following stage of analysis is outlined below, showcasing the results of Pearson's r linear correlation for each of the three pairs of variables tested: the feeling of stress with burnout, the feeling of stress with stress coping styles and the stress coping styles with burnout. The results are presented in tables 2, 3 and 4, respectively. The above results indicate a strong positive correlation between exhaustion and disappointment as dimensions of burnout and the lack of awards at work ($r > .50$, $p < .001$). Additionally, only uncertainty related to work organization correlates with exhaustion, and this is a moderately strong relationship, while lack of control remains in a negative and weak correlation. The dimension of disappointment also maintains positive, moderate relationships with organizational uncertainty and a sense of responsibility, and a weak negative relationship with lack of control over work processes and outcomes. The perceived lack of professional effectiveness demonstrates a positive, moderate correlation with the greatest number of stressful work conditions, such as uncertainty, social contacts, a sense of responsibility, and lack of support, and a negative, moderate correlation with lack of control. The least correlation was observed between the dimension of lack of commitment to relationships and stress, with only two of its dimensions: uncertainty and lack of support, contributing to decreased involvement in interpersonal relationships. An interesting finding is the negative correlation between exhaustion, lack of professional effectiveness, and disappointment, and lack of control as an organizational stressor. The lower the sense of control experienced by the respondents at work, the less exhaustion, disappointment, and increase in professional effectiveness they experience. It is possible that awareness of the lack of influence over specific directions and outcomes of one's work is associated with the adoption of stress coping strategies that may help mitigate the effects of burnout. Subsequent analyses will verify the interrelationships between stressors and coping styles (Table 3).

Table 3. Correlations between the subjective sense of stress and styles of coping with stress

Variables	Task-focused style	Emotion-focused style	Avoidance-focused style
Mental burden	-.10	.00	.00
No awards	-.11	-.19	.10
Feeling of uncertainty	.03	.00	.30**
Social contacts	-.25*	.17	.35**

cont. tab. 3

Variables	Task- -focused style	Emotion- -focused style	Avoidance- -focused style
Sense of danger	.14	-.01	-.23
Physical nuisance	.06	-.16	-.28*
Unpleasant work conditions	.08	.18	.11
Lack of control	-.05	-.15	-.41***
Lack of support	-.10	.02	.07
Sense of responsibility	-.01	-.05	-.03
Sense of stress – Total	-.09	-.05	.13

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

The results in Table 3 indicate three interrelationships - a negative and moderate one between lack of control at work and avoidance-focused coping style, a weak positive one between the stressfulness of social contacts and avoidance coping style, and a weak negative one between physical nuisance and avoidance coping style. It appears that as the frequency of using the avoidance coping style increases, the stressfulness of the lack of control over the course and outcomes of one's work decreases, as designers distance themselves from this source of stress. Conversely, employing the avoidance coping style intensifies the sense of uncertainty related to work organization and stress associated with social contacts. Finally, physical nuisance at work is weakly and negatively associated with the avoidance coping style, indicating that its use is linked to a lower perception of physical discomfort.

The last analysis of correlations concerns coping styles and burnout. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Correlations between the style of coping with stress and burnout

Variables	Psycho- physical exhaustion	Lack of commitment to relationships	Lack of professional effectiveness	Disappoint- ment
Task-focused style	.02	.23*	-.06	-.03
Emotion-focused style	-.17	-.28*	.21	-.20
Avoidance focused style	.14	-.07	.33*	.11

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

The above analyses reveal one moderate and positive relationship: between the avoidance-focused coping style and the lack of professional effectiveness ($r = .33$, $p < .05$). Moreover, this style does not appear to be significantly associated with other dimensions of burnout. On the other hand, as the use of emotion-focused coping style increases, albeit to a weak extent, commitment to relationships also increases ($r = -.28$, $p < .05$), and frequent utilization of task-focused style is weakly linked to a decrease in involvement in relationships ($r = .23$, $p < .05$). It seems that the more individuals focus on their own experiences, the more they maintain relationships with others, whereas when employing task-oriented styles, thus confronting stressors directly, they engage less in interpersonal relationships. Given the weak interdependencies, caution should be exercised in interpreting the results, although it is worthwhile to replicate them in a larger sample due to the emerging interesting patterns of relationships and their explanations.

Discussion

Burnout in the studied sample has reached the upper limit of average scores in each of its dimensions, and in the scope of two scales: lack of engagement in relationships and disillusionment, men significantly more frequently experience its effects. The results should be concerning, as they indicate that the stressfulness of work conditions as a necessary condition for the development of burnout may pose a significant threat to exacerbating burnout symptoms in the future. Differences in the portrayal of burnout between women and men confirm the heterogeneity of this process, where men more often employ distancing mechanisms from sources of stress, which may manifest as a loss of engagement in interpersonal relationships and cynicism. This, in turn, seems to be associated with a sense of disillusionment (Pines & Arnson, 1988; Maslach & Leiter, 2005). Further analyses confirmed the high stressfulness of most work conditions, such as: the sense of mental workload associated with its complexity, uncertainty regarding work organization, sense of responsibility, lack of rewards, lack of support at work, and social contacts. The convergence of these factors is not random and clearly presents the key dilemmas faced by the studied employees in the design industry. They are subject to strong pressure from external expectations, while simultaneously not receiving mitigating support or compensation in the form of rewards and reinforcements in the workplace. According to dominant burnout theories, the stronger the employee experiences mismatch in their relationship with work, the greater the risk of developing professional burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001; Maslach & Leiter, 2005; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Furthermore, women significantly experience more stress in interpersonal contacts (clients, colleagues), which is supported by research findings available in the literature indicating that women exhibit higher levels of friendliness and empathy than men. Consequently, they are more prone to exhaustion than symptoms of cynicism as a mechanism of distancing from relationships, which

is more frequently observed among men (Brookings et al., 1985; Busing & Perrar, 1991; Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998; Sęk, 1994). The most common coping style with stress turned out to be avoidance-focused, prevailing over the others at an average frequency of use. The results also indicate heterogeneity among the participants—men significantly more often employ task-focused styles (i.e., confrontational styles), while women tend to use emotion-focused and avoidance-focused styles (non-confrontational styles). These findings largely align with those already present in the literature, suggesting that gender differentiates the frequency of coping strategies, with men predominating in active, problem-solving forms, and women in emotional expression and reducing unpleasant stress-related tension (Ogus et al., 1990; Poulin & Walter, 1993; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998; Sęk, 1994). Why, however, did the avoidance-focused coping style turn out to be the most common in the entire sample? Avoidance is one of the coping strategies in situations of frustration, when an individual's goals are thwarted by encountered obstacles. Frustration induces a state of disorganization and disorientation in decision-making and executive functions. When faced with insurmountable barriers, an individual may attempt to circumvent them, substitute one goal for another, or withdraw from action, which may take the form of avoiding confrontation with the source of stress (Cox, Griffiths, & Rial-Gonzales, 2000, 2016; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Maslach & Leiter, 2010, 2021; Tomaszewski, 1982). Given that the surveyed designers exhibit concerning levels of burnout symptoms—already hovering around high scores—in terms of exhaustion, disillusionment, loss of engagement in relationships, and diminished professional efficacy, it can be assumed that the predominance of avoidant coping styles may threaten further escalation of burnout. Avoidance strategies, when used over time, pose the highest risk in this regard (Sęk, 2004; Terelak, 2005). Subsequent analyses aimed to answer questions about the interrelationships between stress, coping styles, and burnout in the studied sample. It was found that the use of task-focused coping style is weakly associated with a decrease in the stressfulness of social contacts, while the use of avoidant coping style is accompanied by an increase in uncertainty regarding work organization and the stressfulness of social contacts, and these are moderately strong associations. However, the strongest relationship concerns the correlation of the avoidant style with a lack of control over the course of work, the stressfulness of which diminishes with an increase in the frequency of avoidance coping style. When an individual distances themselves from sources of stress, the belief that they have little control over what happens at work ceases to be troublesome. This aligns with stress and coping theory, where the effectiveness of stress management depends on individual characteristics, the duration of the stress transaction, and the controllability of the stressful situation (Sęk, 2004; Terry, 1994). If an individual has little influence on changing the conditions of their work, temporary use of non-confrontational styles (including avoidance) can provide relief and necessary distance helpful in ultimately devising coping strategies (Ogińska-Bulik & Juczyński, 2010; Suls & Fletcher, 1985).

The latest analyses focused on the relationships between coping styles and burnout in the studied sample. Task-focused styles were found to be associated with a weakening of engagement in relationships with others. Presumably, project development and responsibility for its outcome as a task become an exhausting challenge that can result in a weakening of interpersonal interactions. Conversely, emotion-focused style is associated with increased engagement in relationships, where through expression and dialogue, unpleasant tension related to occupational stress can be reduced. Finally, avoidance-focused style contributes to a loss of professional efficacy, thus posing a risk of burnout when used over the long term.

Conclusion

The most stressful factors experienced by employees in the creative industry include social contacts, sense of uncertainty caused by work organization, lack of rewards, sense of mental burden related to the complexity of work, sense of responsibility and lack of support. Social interactions were found to be a particularly significant stressor among women, which is the only gender difference in the level of stress experienced.

The conducted research confirmed that burnout syndrome affects creative employees in the design industry and their ability to cope with stress is insufficient. This prompts further research and dissemination of awareness of the risk factors of professional burnout and the need to develop methods and preventive actions to protect the health of creative, professionally active people. The importance of creativity for the development and achievements of civilization is enormous, which is why it is so important to provide creative individuals with optimal working conditions.

Translated by Author

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PODMIOTOWE I ORGANIZACYJNE
CZYNNIKI RYZYKA WYPALENIA ZAWODOWEGO
WŚRÓD PRACOWNIKÓW KREATYWNYCH BRANŻY PROJEKTOWEJ

Streszczenie. Cel. Niniejsze badanie ma na celu zbadanie współzależności między stresem, strategiami radzenia sobie i wypaleniem zawodowym wśród projektantów zajmujących się pracą twórczą w takich dziedzinach jak grafika, fotografia reklamowa, ilustracja, rysunek i rzeźba. **Grupa badana i narzędzia.** Grupa badana obejmowała 80 osób (40 kobiet i 40 mężczyzn) zajmujących się pracą twórczą. Zastosowano następujące narzędzia: Kwestionariusz wypalenia zawodowego (LBQ), Kwestionariusz radzenia sobie ze stresem (CISS) i Kwestionariusz subiektywnej oceny pracy (KSOP). **Rezultaty.** Wyniki badań wskazują na średni poziom stresu i wypalenia zawodowego. Zaobserwowano zwiększony poziom wyczerpania psychofizycznego, rozczarowania i braku skuteczności zawodowej w odniesieniu do czynników stresogennych, takich jak brak nagród w pracy, poczucie niepewności spowodowane organizacją pracy, zwiększone poczucie odpowiedzialności i kontakty społeczne. **Wnioski.** Interakcje społeczne okazały się szczególnie istotnym czynnikiem stresującym wśród kobiet, stanowiąc jedyną różnicę związaną z płcią w postrzeganym poziomie stresu. Ponadto stwierdzono, że kobiety częściej stosują style radzenia sobie skoncentrowane na unikaniu i emocjach, podczas gdy mężczyźni częściej preferują strategie radzenia sobie skoncentrowane na zadaniu.

Słowa kluczowe: stres organizacyjny, radzenie sobie ze stresem, wypalenie zawodowe, praca kreatywna, pracownicy branży projektowej

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