

Social workers' job strain and burnout: reflections on recent research and policy developments

Dr Shereen Hussein
Principal Research Fellow
King's College London

Acknowledgement and Disclaimer

- Data used for further analysis presented here have originally belonged to two national evaluations of social work practices with children and adults. The original evaluation of the social work practice with children was funded by the Department for Education and its final report published in 2011; the evaluation of social work practice with adults was funded by the Department of Health and its final report published in 2014. The author is grateful to the input of the evaluation of social work practice with adults and social work practice with children research teams. The arguments and views presented in this paper are of the authors' alone and do not necessarily represent that of the funders.

Background

- Social work as ‘emotionally taxing’ profession (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002)
- Observed higher stress level among the profession than average workers (Lloyed et al, 2002)
- Some stressors are inherent to the job
 - Burden and responsibilities; poor public image etc.
- Other stressors are organizational in nature
 - Role clarity; hierarchical decision-making, level of administration etc.
- Burnout is associated with health outcomes and job performance

Data

- Two large evaluations with similar data collection tools
- Large surveys collected detailed information on
 - Karasek Job Content Questionnaire (JCQ) → Demand-Control model
 - Maslach Burnout Inventory → Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization and Personal Accomplishments
- Spanning from 2009 to 2013 and covering two large groups of social work practitioners:
 - From 22 diverse Local Authorities
 - Working in the main with
 - Children and families (n=2050)
 - Adults and older people (n=2978)

Aims and Methods

- attempts to conceptualise wider factors influencing social workers' job strain accounting for:
 - Main users' groups (especially adults and children)
 - Personal characteristics
 - Time, reflecting wider public image and policy context.
- Utilizes standardized measures of burnout (Maslach Burnout Inventory); job control and psychological job demand (Karasek JCQ)
- Complemented by documentary analysis of media coverage from 2009 to 2013 through a timeline analysis

Social Work in the news: 2009

Stress blamed for absence rate that is 60% higher than average

BY NIGEL MORRIS, DEPUTY POLITICAL EDITOR | Wednesday 16 September 2009



Social workers are taking "shocking" levels of sick leave – far higher than the national average – prompting protests they are being subjected to intolerable pressure.

Freedom of Information requests discovered that the average social worker takes almost 12 days off a year through illness – with one in 10 calling in sick at least 20 times. The figures emerged after the government launched a campaign to recruit more than 5,000 new social workers. There are currently 2,700 vacancies in the profession amid fears that the outrage over Baby P's death has deterred many people from choosing a social work career.

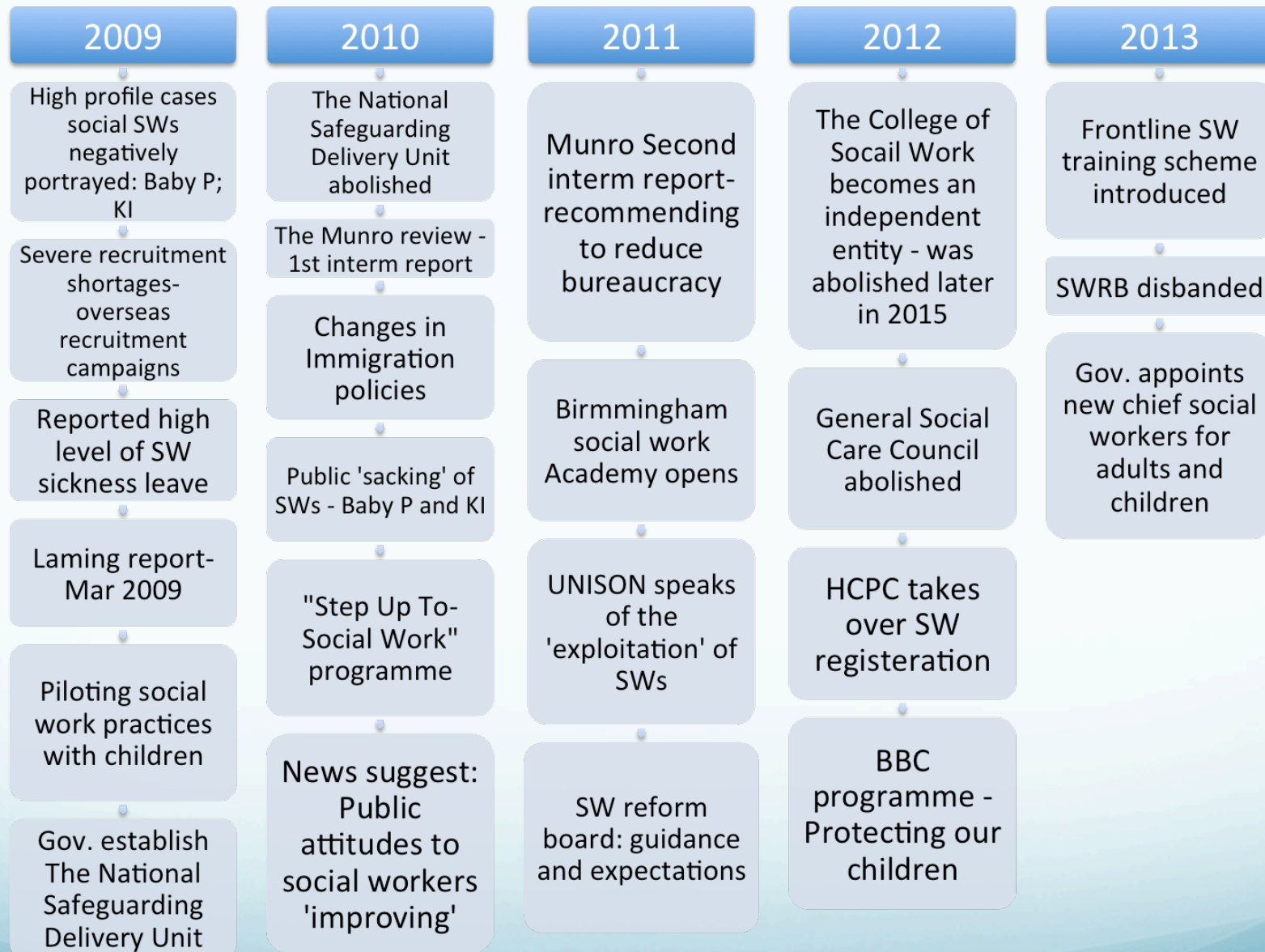
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Timeline: 2009-2013



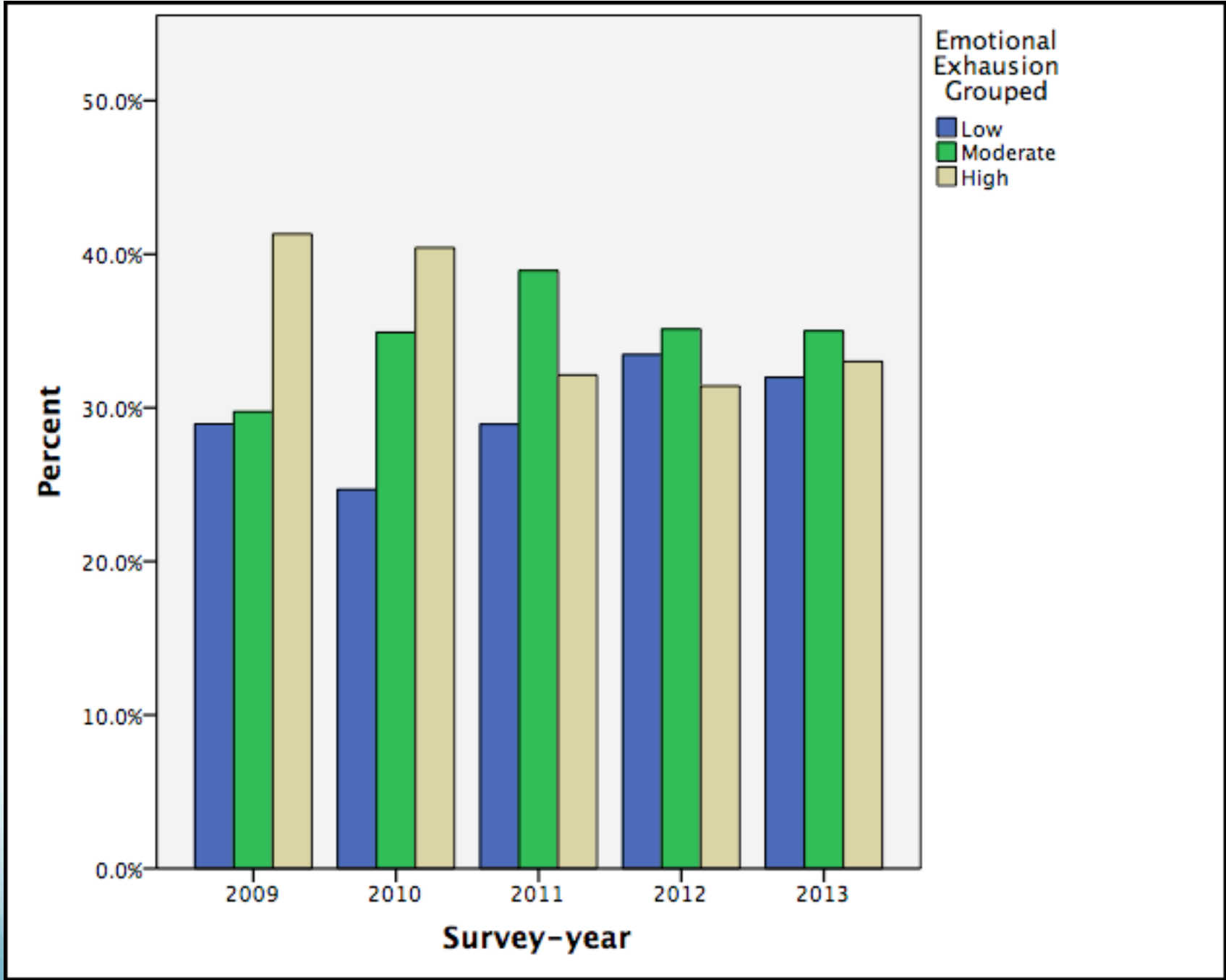


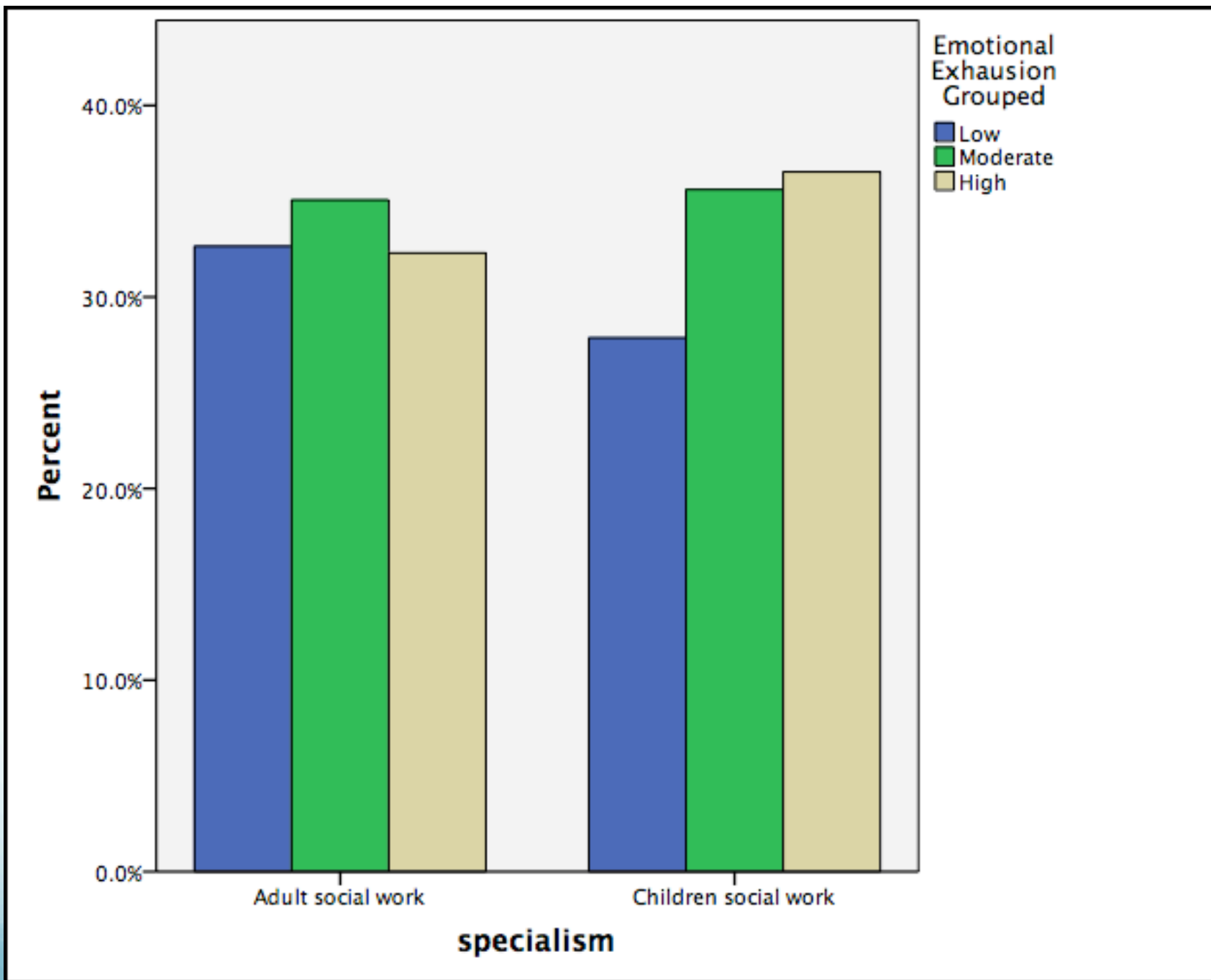
Findings

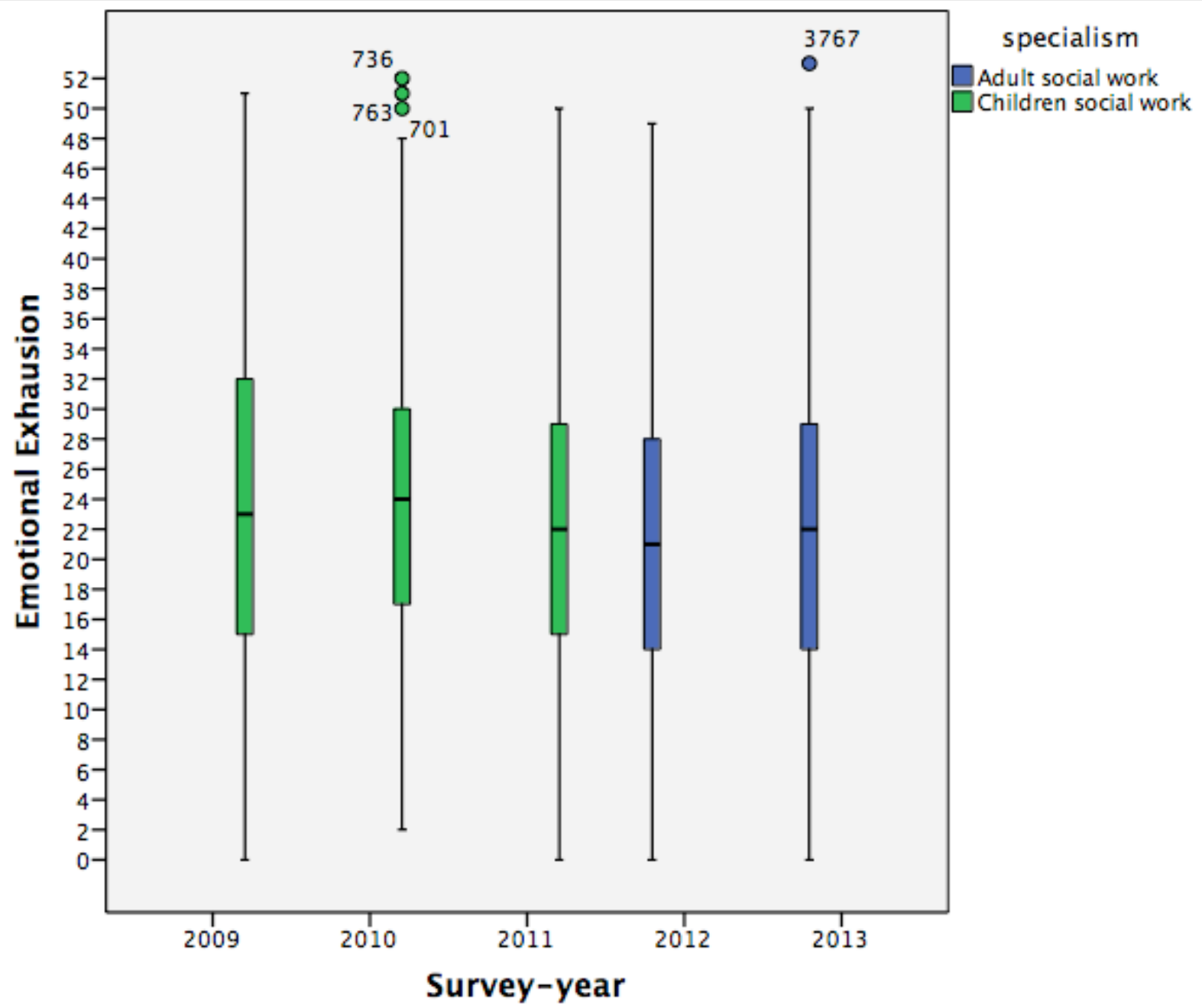
Social workers' surveys

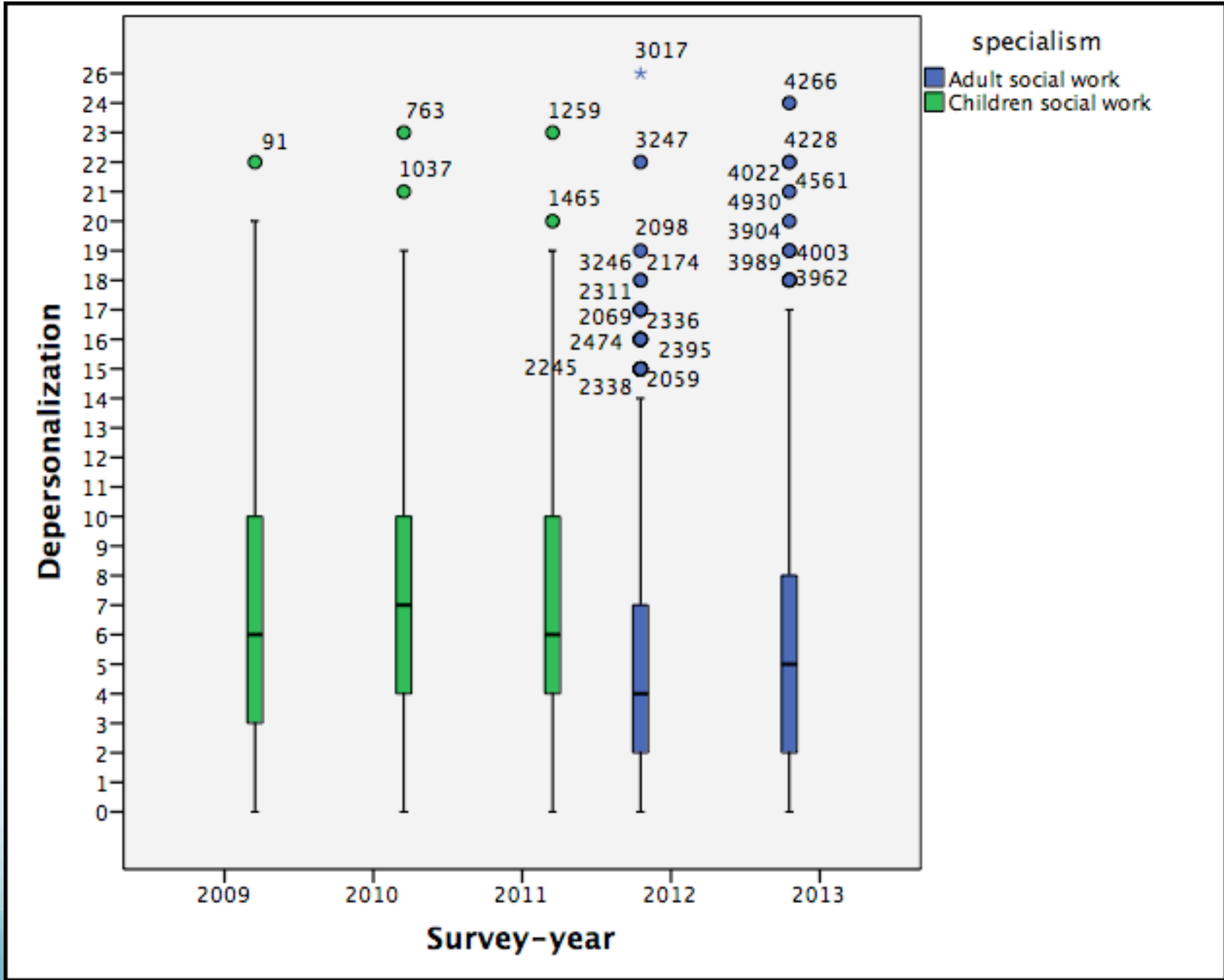
Stress and Burnout measures

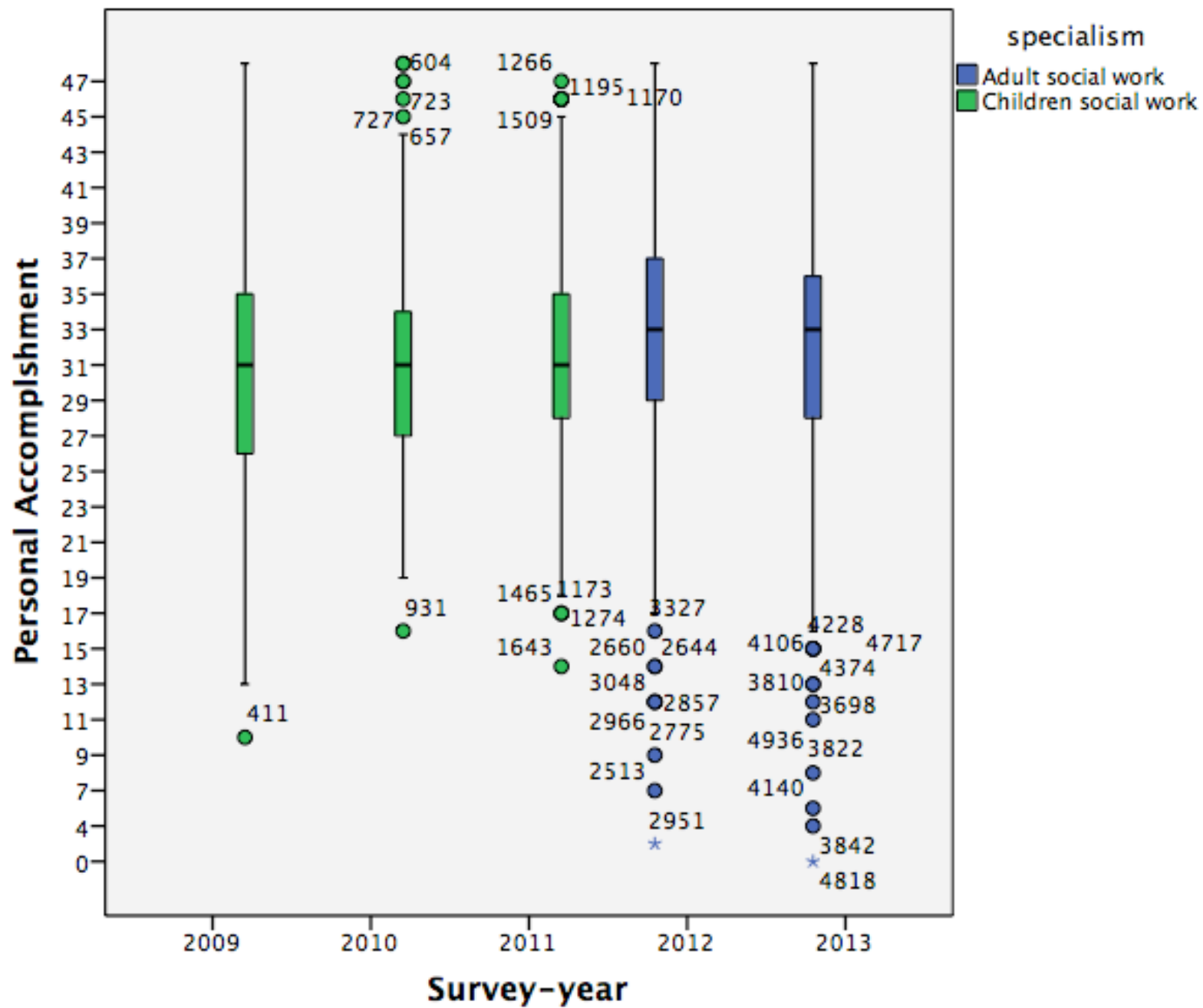
- The MBI (Maslach et. al, 1996) is the most widely used measure of burnout.
- 22-item, 6-point anchored Likert-type scale has three components:
 - “emotional exhaustion” (EE; feelings of being overextended and depleted of emotional and physical resources);
 - “depersonalization” (Dp; negative or excessively detached responses to various aspects of the job);
 - and reduced “personal accomplishment” (PA; feelings of incompetence and a lack of achievement at work).
- Scales are computed separately and cannot be combined to form a single measure





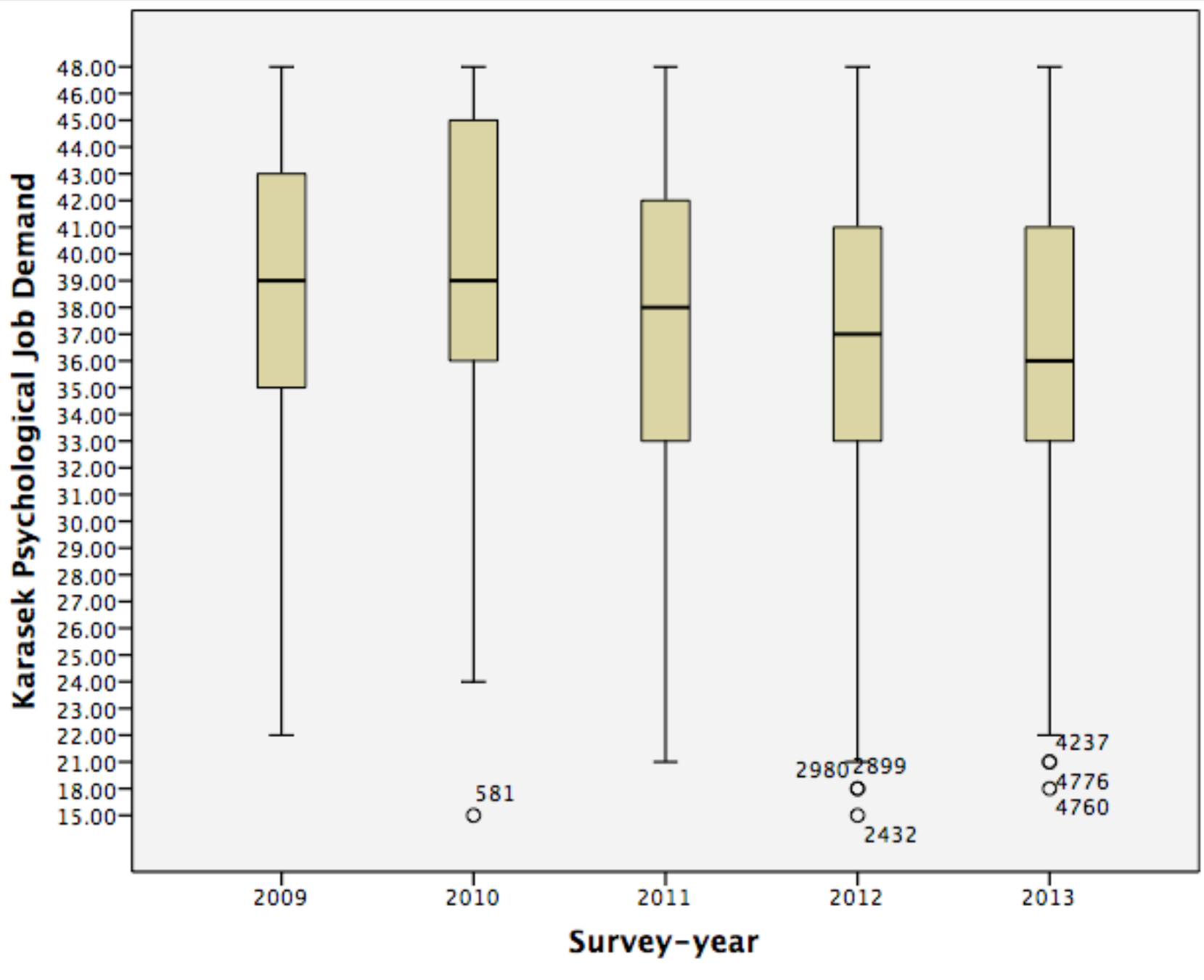


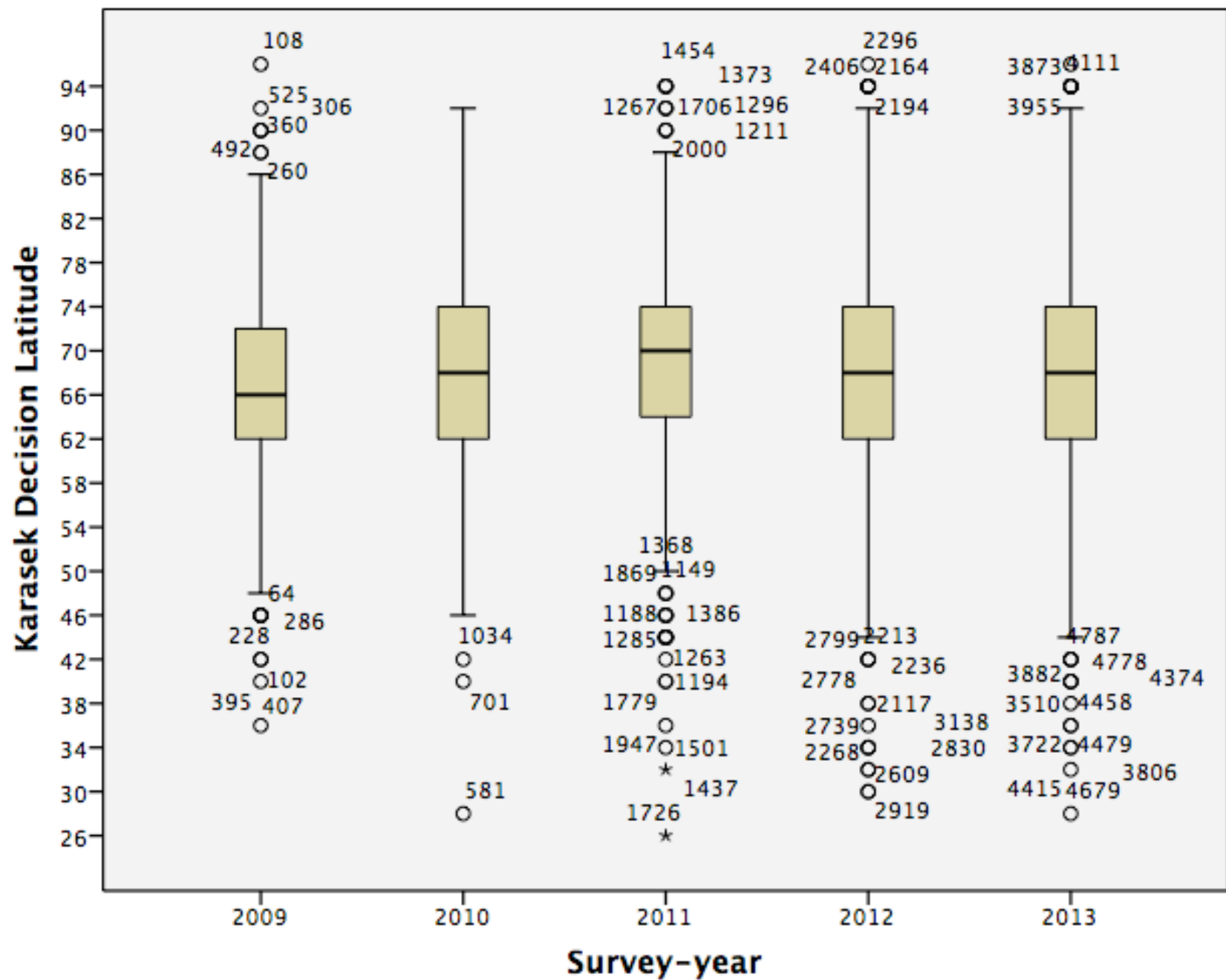


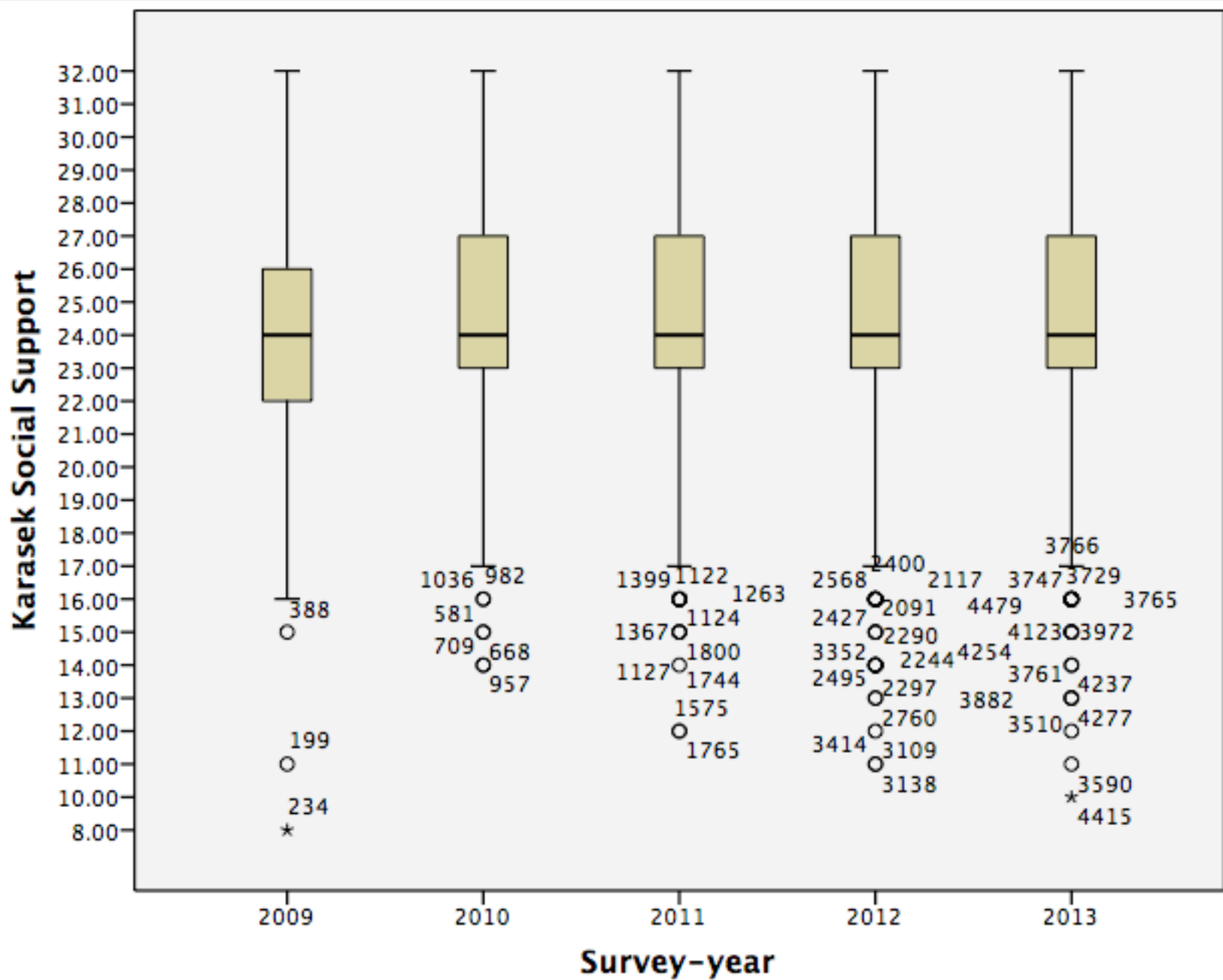


Karasek Job Control Questionnaire (JCQ)

- JCQ is a self-completed instrument designed to identify two crucial aspects:
 - Job demand, the stressors existing in the work environment.
 - Job decision latitude, the extent to which employees have the potential to control their tasks and conduct throughout the working day (Karasek, Brisson, et al., 1998).
- JCQ social support scale combines both coworkers' and supervisory support scales.
 - Such support is theorized to moderate or buffer the impact of job-related stress
 - Individuals in high stressor jobs will have lower psychological strain in the presence of social support.

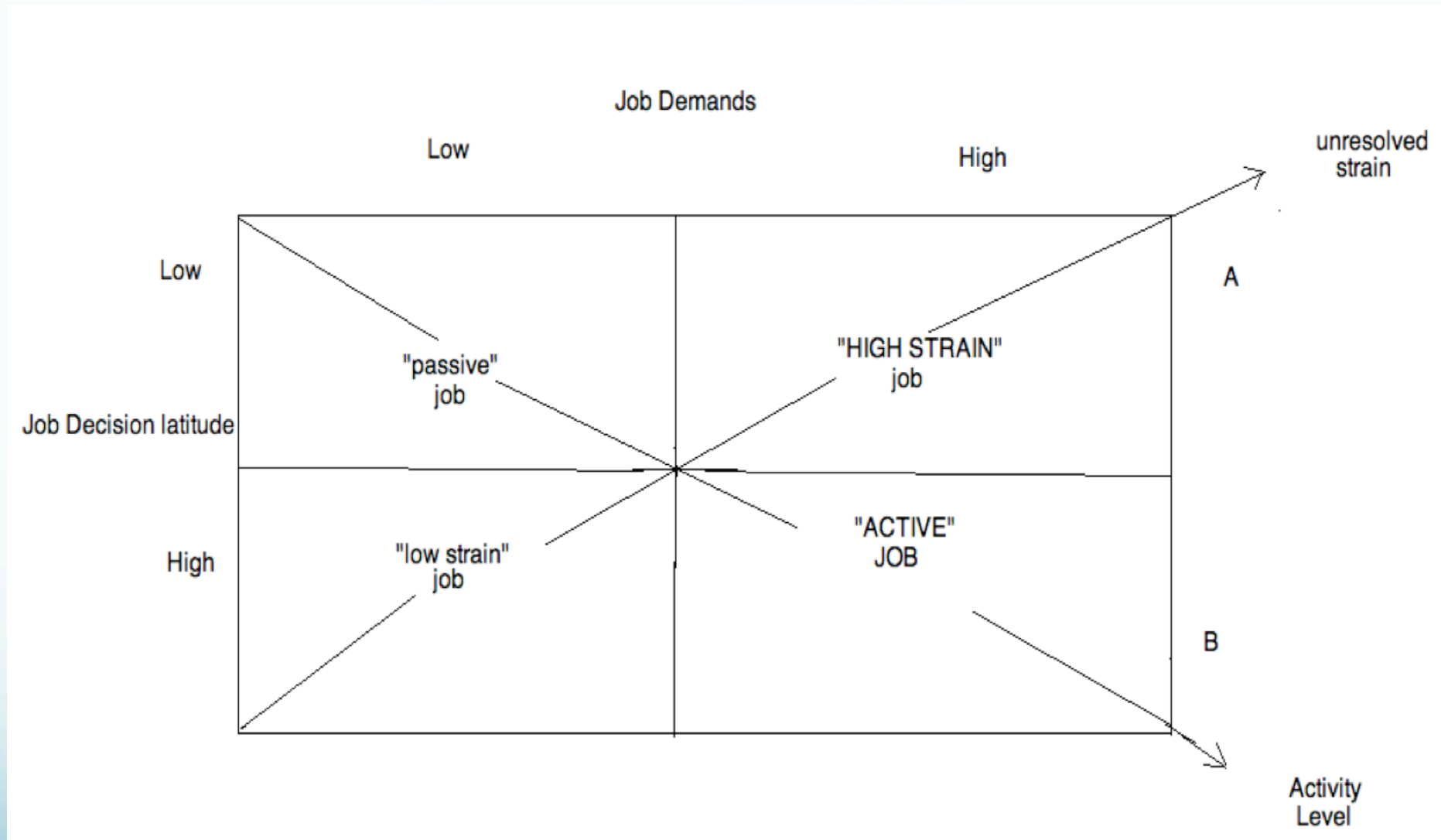


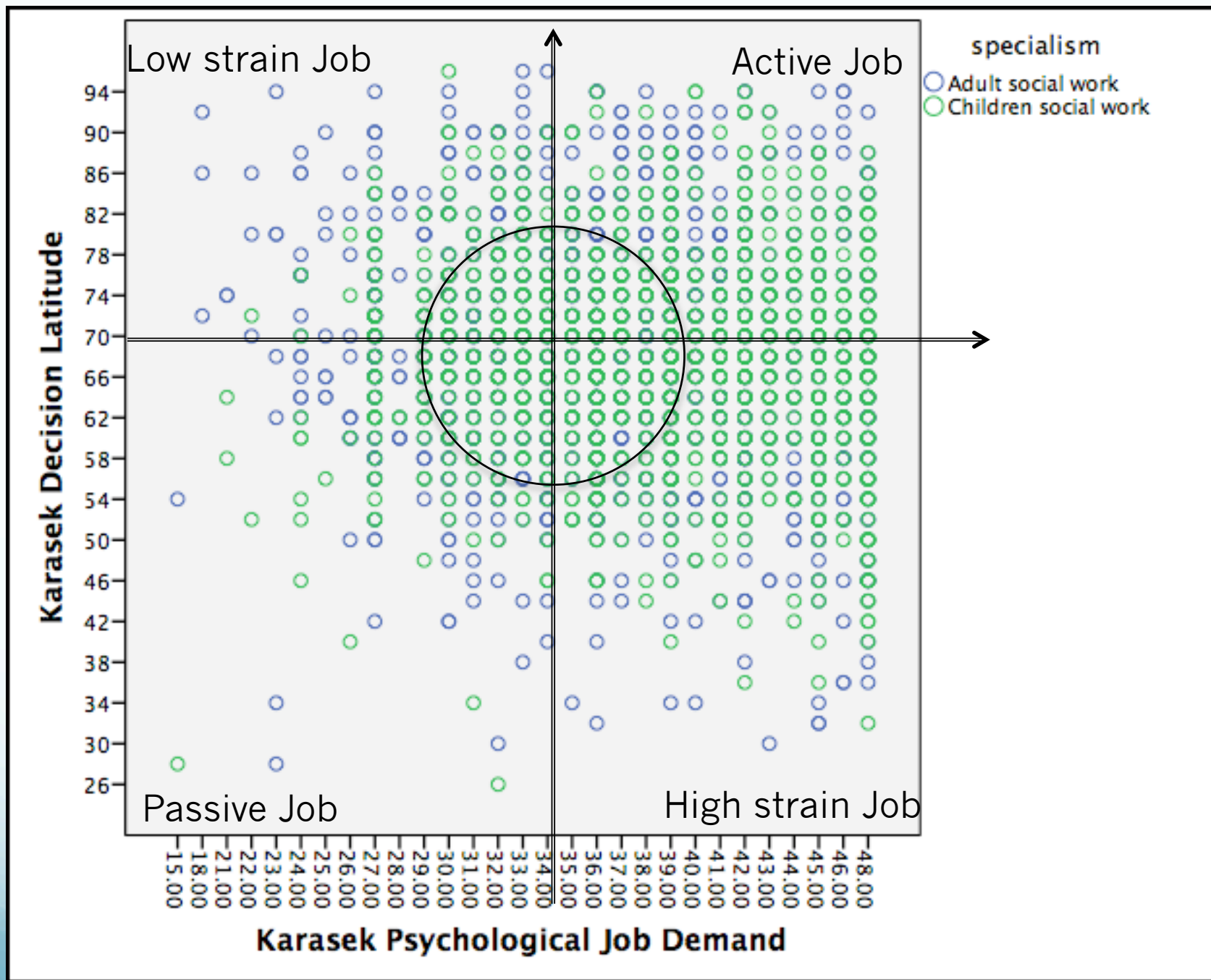




Karasek Job Demand-Control Model

- Postulates that job strain is the result of an interaction between demand and control
- a job with high demand and low control is 'high strain' → unresolved stress
- a job with low demand and high control is 'low strain'
- Somewhere between these 2 extremes lie 'passive' and 'active' jobs → ideal state
- The model was examined in relation to workers' health outcomes, esp. cardiovascular disease



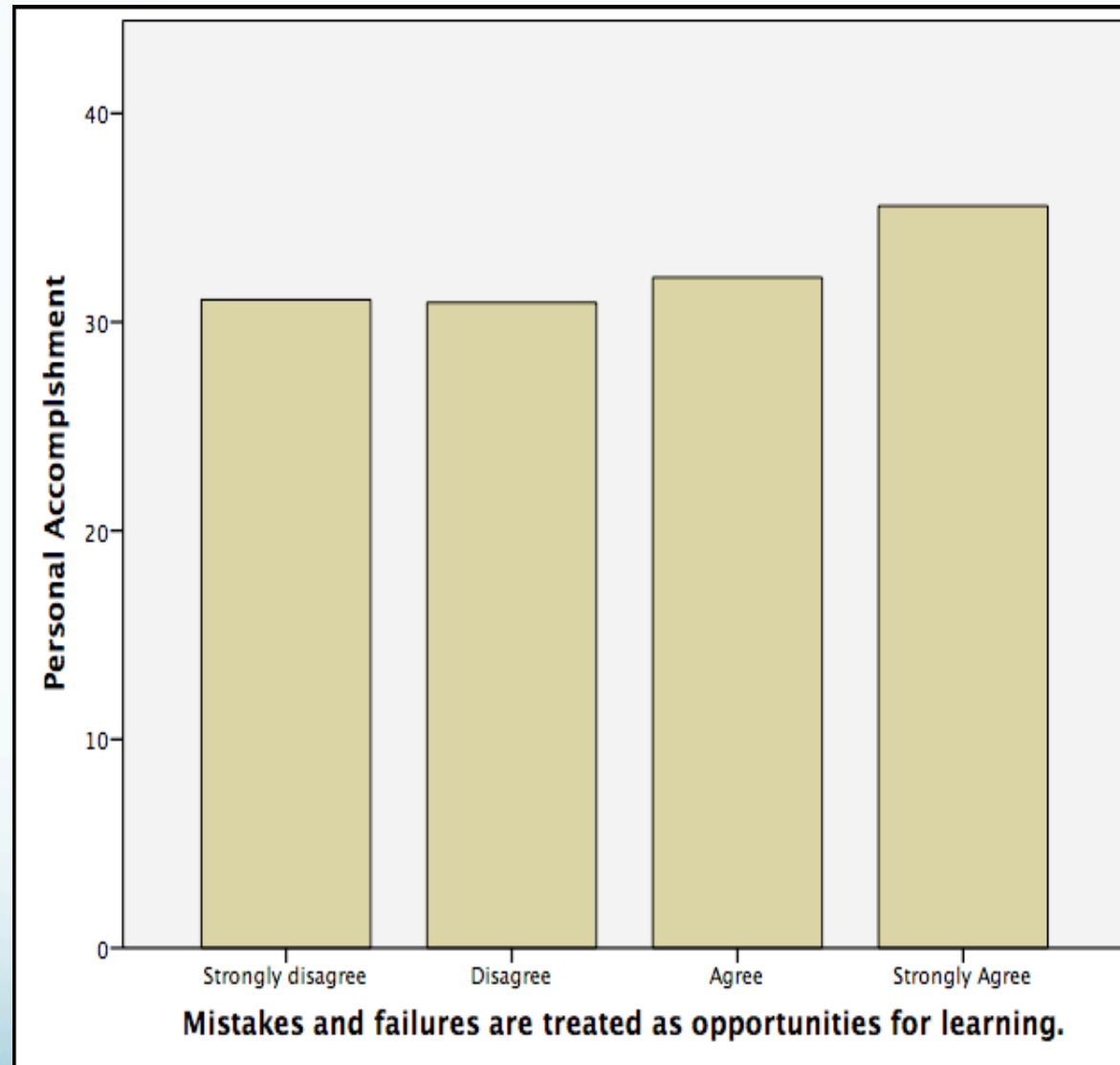




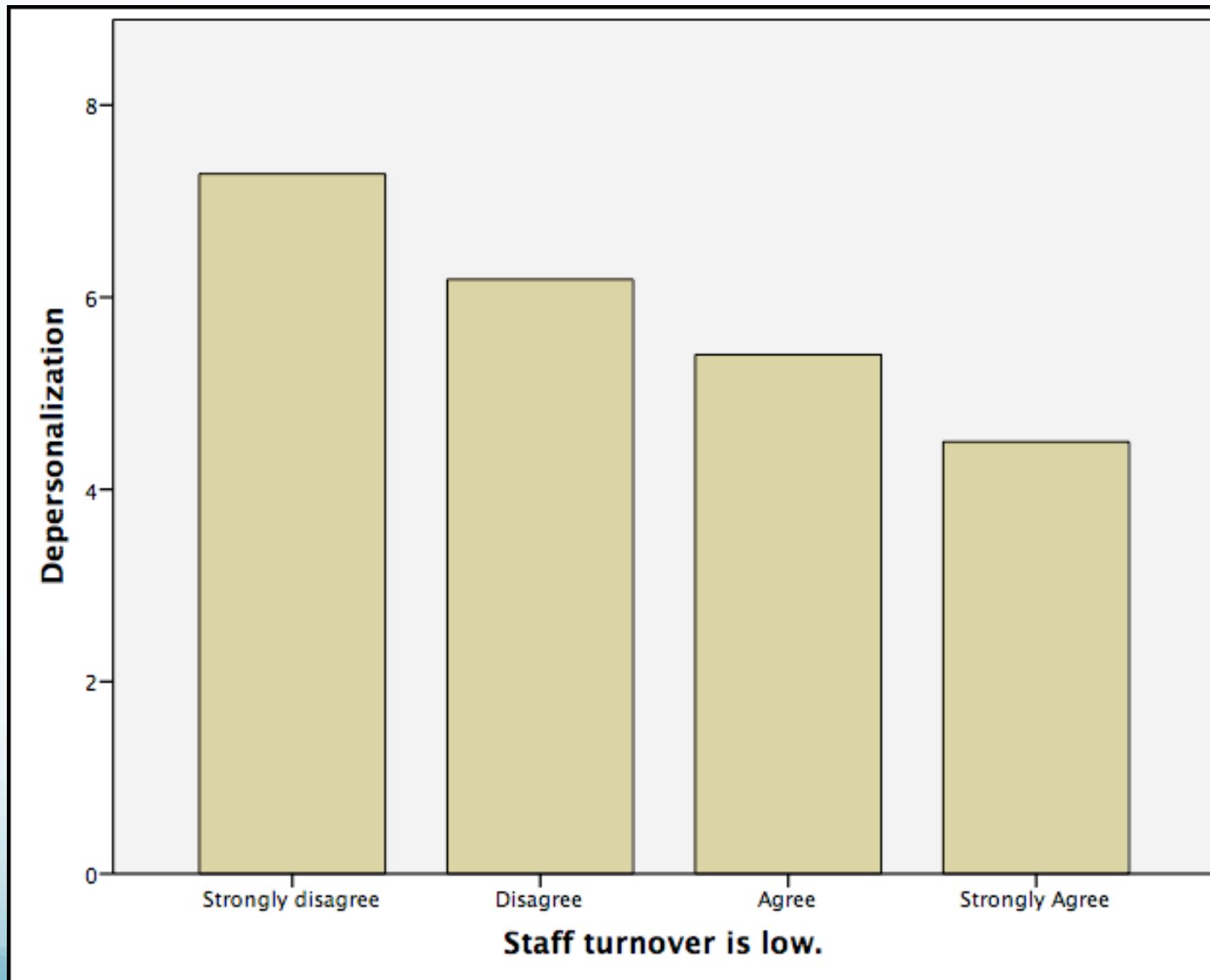
Work and organizational culture

Does it make a difference?

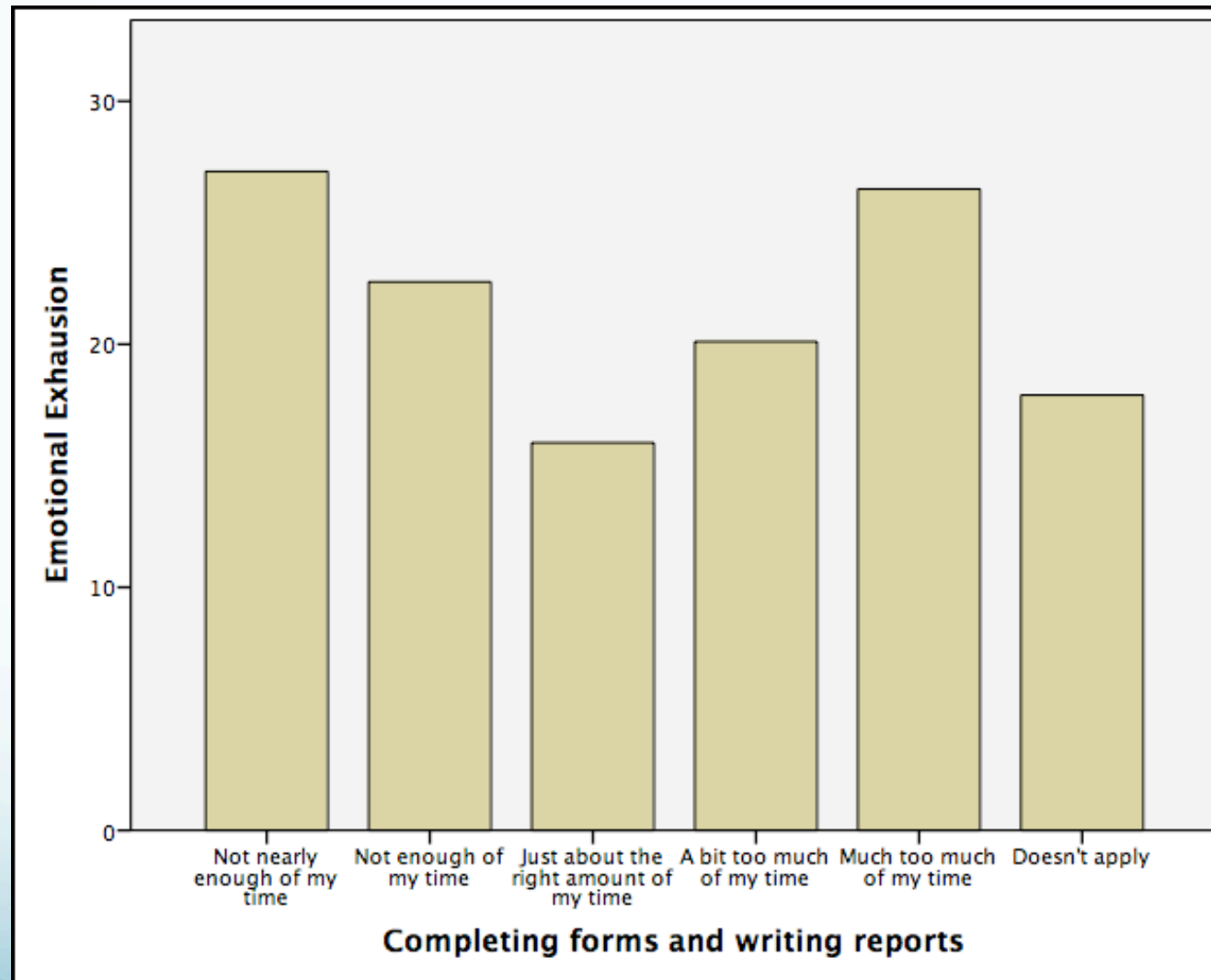
Work culture and stress



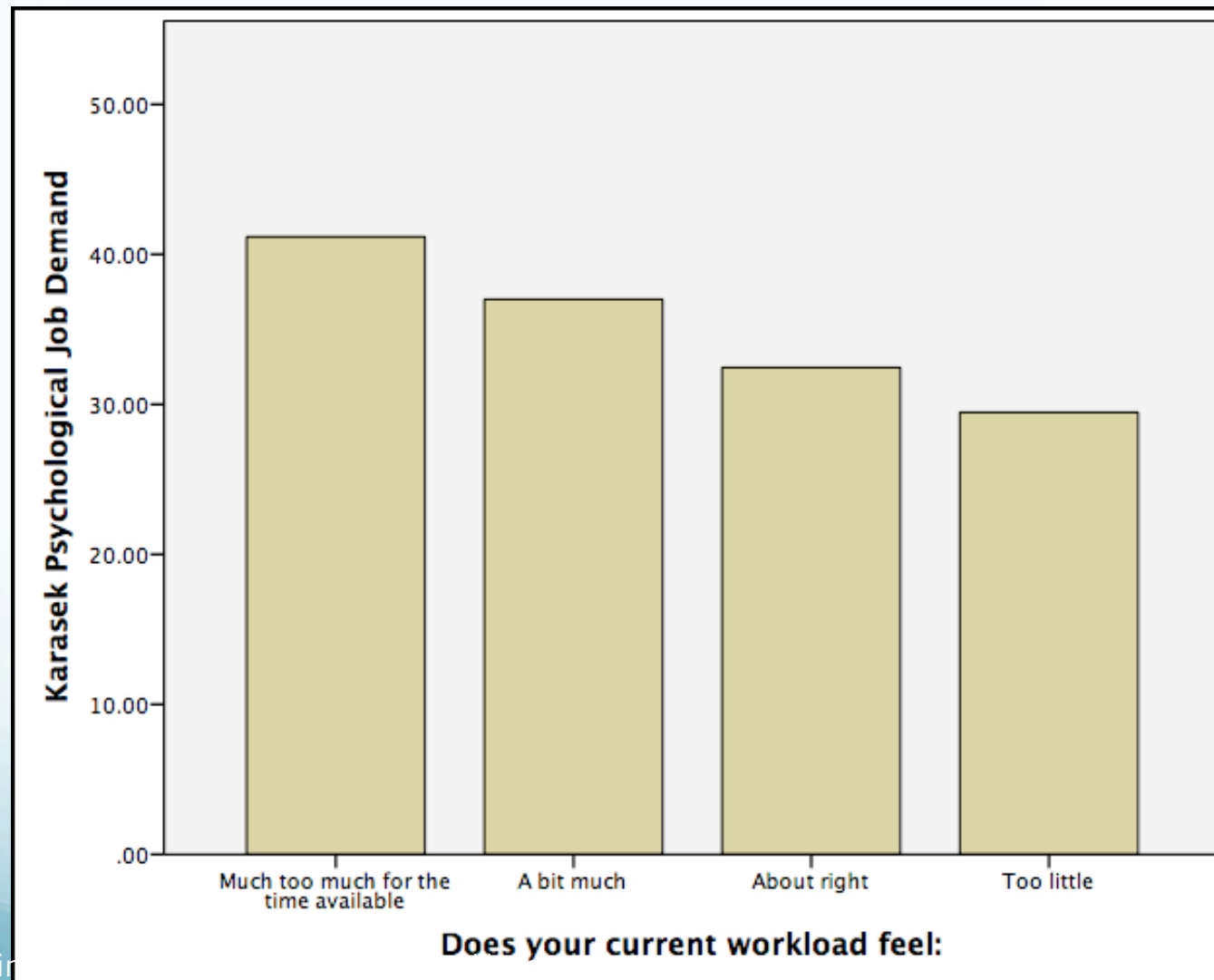
Turnover and stress



Completing forms are important but needs to be kept at the 'right' amount



Workload and job demand go hand in hand





Conclusion and Discussion

Discussion: Stress levels

- Work and organizational cultures don't make a difference
- Differences by specialism with children social workers displaying significantly higher levels of burnout and lower levels of personal accomplishments:
 - Are these related to time period or are true differences between specialisms? Could be true for both or either.
- Social workers are in the majority located within the high job strain and active job quadrants according to Karasek demand-control model.

Social work burnout and the wider context

- Burnout (esp. EE and DP) and psychological job demand are sensitive to the 'burden' of media coverage and high profile cases
- The period 2009-2013 saw active policies aimed at changing social workers' image, work environment and social work education.
- Psychological job demand has been reduced over time but decision latitude and levels of work support did not improve
 - Had active policies to reduce bureaucracy and change work cultures been working?

Thank you for listening

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