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## Newcomer to juvenile rehabilitation work Becoming a juvenile counselor (case study analysis)

**Abstract:** The article undertaken focuses on the process of entering the role of a resocialization counselor from the perspective of newly hired individuals. Based on a case study analysis, the process of becoming a juvenile counselor in selected juvenile rehabilitation facilities was reconstructed. The chosen research perspective contributed to the characterization of difficulties and the ways of coping with them by juvenile counselors with short professional experience. An important contribution is the "male" and "female" perspective of the work captured in the course of the research. In the analyses made, not only the status of the newcomer was important, but also the observed differences between the realization and implementation of the professional role from the point of view of a woman and a man.  
**Key words:** resocialization counselor, rehabilitation facilities, counseling work, juveniles, case study research.

### Introduction

The main reason for delving into the reconstruction of the process of becoming a juvenile counselor in a juvenile rehabilitation institution is the evident gap in the academic literature concerning the perspective of actively working juvenile counselors. Analyzing the available literature on the subject, we noticed that the function-

ning of rehabilitation institutions and the effectiveness of the rehabilitation process are described mainly through the lens of the social climate (in the context of a total institution) (Goffman 2011) and assessments of the functioning of wards placed in these facilities (e.g. Chomczyński 2014; Sawicki, Markowska-Manista 2022). In addition, the research space in this area has been dominated by normative research, based on measurements and generalizations (Pytka 1983; Zalewski 2004; Sobczak 2007; Staniaszek 2018; Nowak 2016). Of course, juvenile counselors participate in scientific research, but they are indirectly involved and are assigned roles as informants, observers, and diagnosticians. Additionally, their work is evaluated according to specific criteria and norms, with efficiency being variously understood as the determinant. One overlooked aspect of research analysis and simultaneously an unknown area are the juvenile counselors themselves, perceived as integrators of the ward's personal structures with the external world (Konopczyński 2016).

Furthermore, our interest in the experiences of juvenile counselors employed at juvenile rehabilitation institutions was bolstered by the discussions surrounding the newly enacted Act on the Support and Social Rehabilitation of Minors (Journal of Laws of 2022, item 1700) This legal act revived a debate that has been present in Polish resocialization pedagogy for many years, particularly concerning the purpose, functions, consequences, and effectiveness of isolating counseling measures towards minors (Ambrozik 2013a, 2013b, 2016; Konopczyński 2014; Kusztal 2018). These changes have significant implications for the development of the professional role of juvenile counselors and the functioning of institutions, as they somewhat provide a framework for the creation of internal regulations. The intensity and dynamics of the discussions on the solutions of the new act highlight the deepening gap and crisis within the juvenile rehabilitation system, while emphasizing the multidimensionality of the work of juvenile counselors employed at social rehabilitation institutions. The social audience, including lawmakers, demands, disciplines, modifies the repertoire of tools, and most importantly, invalidates the voice of juvenile resocialization counselors in various ways. It is impossible not to notice that juvenile counselors working within rehabilitation facilities on a daily basis were excluded from the implementation of the main task in the process of creating the act, which was the refreshment, organization, and systematization of matters related to proceedings concerning minors; that they were reduced solely to the role of recipients, executors, and "consumers" of the act. Despite the fact that the teaching staff is an incredibly important element embedded in this act, their influence on the final shape of the document was minimal. The absence of experts' voices highlighted penal populism and political priorities. In this framework, the work of juvenile counselors has a distinctly dualistic character. On the one hand, juvenile counselors are obligated to implement and respect the legal framework imposed by legislators, while on the other, they act as tutors and educators focused on providing support, care, counseling, and therapy for minors (Śliwa 2013; Konopczyński 2022).

As a result, the subject of the following considerations has become the process of becoming an educational worker in social rehabilitation institutions, such as a youth education center, correctional facility, and shelter for minors. The relationships that juvenile counselors (novices) established with their wards became the main problematic area of reflection for us. Drawing on the experiences of the study participants, we attempted to identify the difficulties novices (newly employed individuals with short professional experience) faced in adapting to the institutional dimension of their counseling work.

In this context, it is worth noting that the status and character of employees in the penitentiary department can be easily traced. The Prison Service keeps meticulous statistics with various data on its personnel, including the number of women and men employed (sw.gov.pl). This aspect seems to be omitted in the characterization of the teaching staff of juvenile facilities. There is no practice or obligation in this area to record juvenile counselors by gender. Is this a neutral factor in the diagnosis of the social world of juvenile counselors? Or is it rather a matter that is little recognized in the research field? In reconstructing the process of “becoming” an educational worker, we decided to outline this issue by taking a closer look at the specificity of the “male” and “female” perspectives on the job. Based on two selected cases, we highlighted the similarities and differences in the professional role played by a female juvenile counselor employed in a male rehabilitation institution and a male juvenile counselor employed in a female institution of the same nature. It should be noted that the analyses conducted here serve as a contribution to further discussions in this area.

## **Counseling work in rehabilitation institutions**

### **Theoretical context**

The actions and interactions of participants in the social world (Strauss 1978) do not occur in a social vacuum; rather, they are the result of conditions entangled in formal-legal, historical, and cultural contexts. The social world of juvenile counselors in rehabilitation institutions is complex and multidimensional, forming in a unique reality through collaborative interactions. The formal-legal context sets the framework for counseling activities and creates institutional daily routines (Ambrozik 2022; Konopczyński 2022). The historical context allows us to capture changes in the treatment of minors and reconstruct the evolutionary axis of the pedagogical profession (see Bóldyrew 2016; Urbaniak-Zajac 2018). The cultural context permeates the ways in which the respondents define their professional roles. Rehabilitation work is incredibly difficult and demanding, yet socially invisible. It is conducted behind the walls of institutions, somewhat “hidden” from the public eye.

At this point, it is worth invoking Everett Hughes’ concept (1958) because the work of juvenile counselors belongs to helping professions while simultaneously

carrying the attributes of “dirty work.” Professions associated with dirty work evoke reluctance due to the nature of their tasks. Although they are essential and socially necessary, people holding such positions experience stigmatization. In the case of pedagogical staff employed in rehabilitation institutions, one can speak of the stigma of the place, institutional space, and people they work with daily, becoming beneficiaries of their life histories.

The social invisibility of the profession of juvenile counselors, the lack of recognition for their work, and the specific labeling and marginalization contribute to the formation of internal communication patterns, constituting a social world with a closed (exclusive) structure. Through the total dimension of rehabilitation institutions (Ambrozik 2013a; Goffman 2011), juvenile counselors as those “on the inside” and “on the outside” act as intermediaries between social worlds. They act as a kind of bridge between the institution and the public. Through a series of actions, juvenile counselors enable the transmission of the external world into the institution where the wards reside, excluded from active social life. One could say that juvenile counselors create, transfer, and receive social imaginaries, acting as integrators, filters of the external world, and distributors of overlapping environments (institutional and non-institutional). This multidimensionality of responsibilities can be particularly challenging for newcomers to the field of resocialization work.

In Poland, there are four types of rehabilitation institutions for juveniles: Youth Educational Centers [Młodzieżowy Ośrodek Wychowawczy – MOW], District Educational Centers [Okręgowy Ośrodek Wychowawczy – OOW], Correctional Facilities [Zakład Poprawczy – ZP], and Shelter for Minors [Schronisko dla Nieletnich – SdN]. Each of these is intended for socially maladjusted youth within the normal intellectual range, as well as for minors with intellectual disabilities. The choice of a specific educational or correctional facility is determined by the family court. These institutions are adapted to provide 24-hour care for juveniles requiring special organization of learning, upbringing and pedagogical methods. Typically, the internal regulations of these institutions systematize the daily schedule and organization of counseling work. In these institutions, resocialization work is designed based on a comprehensive assessment of the minor conducted by a team of specialists from the respective institution. This assessment serves as the basis for creating and periodically evaluating an individual program of counseling, resocialization, and therapeutic interventions for each ward. It is worth noting that the length of stay in these institutions is considered individually based on the minor’s life situation and their “progress” in resocialization (Szczepanik 2012). Youth Educational Centers are operated for children and socially maladjusted youth between the ages of 13–18 (Journal of Laws of 2017, item 1606). According to a report by the Supreme Audit Office<sup>1</sup> published in 2018, some

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<sup>1</sup> Full report on the inspection of resocialization activities MOW LSZ.410.004.00.2017 reg. no. 153/2017/P/17/099/LSZ is available at: <https://www.nik.gov.pl/plik/id,15816,vp,18331.pdf>, (accessed: 07 February 2023).

of the most common reasons for placing a minor in a MOW include running away from home, truancy, extortion and theft, use of aggression and violence, addiction issues, and ultimate non-compliance with their previous correctional measure. Although youth education centers are not isolation facilities, they share characteristics with total institutions. According to the law, these institutions are primarily aimed at eliminating signs of social maladjustment and preparing the wards for independent, responsible life after leaving the facility, in accordance with applicable social and legal norms (Journal of Laws of 2017, item 1606).

District Educational Centers, on the other hand, are considered a stricter correctional measure applied to minors between 13 and 19 years of age who have committed a criminal act and have been deemed demoralized (Journal of Laws of 2022, item 1890). According to the legislator, OOWs are meant to fill the gap in rehabilitation efforts for minors placed in youth education centers and correctional facilities. While creating an additional institution may reduce the existing diversity among the wards in terms of their level of demoralization and the severity of their offenses, concerns arise about expanding the range of institutional (total) measures, potentially reinforcing the tendency to isolate youth and exclude them from active social life (Ambrozik 2016).

Correctional Facilities are intended for youth aged 13 to 21. In exceptional cases, the court can extend the correctional measure beyond a youth's 21st birthday, but not beyond their 24th birthday, if certain criteria are met, such as the ineffectiveness of previous correctional measures, a high degree of demoralization of the juvenile, the type and circumstances of the committed crime. Correctional facilities have enhanced security measures. In Poland, these institutions are organized in open, semi-open, closed, and high supervision systems, as well as for juveniles who have reached the age of 21. Regardless of the type, the cadre of specialists employed in ZPs implements a system of integrated interventions aimed at motivating the ward to cooperate and participate in the development of their appropriate social behaviors (Journal of Laws of 2022, item 1700).

In exceptional situations, the court may decide to place a juvenile in a Shelter for Minors. These shelters are intended for individuals aged 13–21 who are suspected of legal wrong, where the circumstances and nature of the act, the degree of demoralization, and the ineffectiveness of previous correctional measures suggest future placement in a correctional facility. There are two types of shelters for minors in Poland: regular and intervention shelters (used in exceptional situations when a minor commits a serious criminal act and/or poses a social threat) (Journal of Laws of 2022, item 1897).

Despite many points of contact, visible similarities in the organization of these institutions, the diagnostic process, and the counseling methods applied, the fundamental difference lies in the extent of security measures and the degree of isolation in these facilities, as well as the age of the minors, which is one of the factors determining the counseling or correctional measure imposed. Interestingly,

only youth educational centers are supervised by the Ministry of Education and Science, while the others fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice.

## Methodology of own research

*The subject and the aim of the study.* The subject of the research undertaken was the professional experiences (the process of becoming) of male and female juvenile counselors in institutions such as youth educational centers, correctional facilities, and shelters for minors. From an interpretative perspective (Konecki 2000; Blumer 2009), we contemplated the professional experiences of juvenile counselors with short professional experience (not exceeding 2 years). We were particularly interested in two fundamental dimensions of this experience. First, we chose to reconstruct the process of introducing a “novice” into resocialization practice by asking how newly employed juvenile counselors establish relationships with the ward group? In this dimension, we mainly reflected on the various difficulties perceived by the individuals under study. Furthermore, we focused on the issue of the professional juvenile counselors from the perspective of both women and men. In other words, we asked what problems related to gender were identified by women employed in male resocialization institutions (ZPiSdN) and men employed in female educational institutions (MOW). The primary goal of our observations was not just the reconstruction of the “process of becoming” a pedagogical employee but, above all, the reconstruction of the performance of this role (induction into the profession) from the perspective of women in relationships with juvenile boys and men in relationships with juvenile girls.

*Description of the nature of the research sample.* The analyses undertaken are of the case study type (Stake 2009), and therefore, we used observations gathered from the experiences of two selected cases (denoted hereafter: Female\_C and Male\_C) to develop the results. As we have already mentioned, we were interested in the experiences of novices employed in the position of juvenile counselors in institutions for minors, so the work experience of those studied was relatively short. FC (about 30 years old) and MC (about 35 years old) graduated with a degree in social rehabilitation pedagogy and served as a full-time employee in the mentioned roles. According to the respondents’ declarations, the decision to work in the institution was not accidental; it was based on their interests and the education they received during their studies. Moreover, the respondents shared similar employment circumstances in the institutions. Both FC and MC became acquainted with the facilities a few years before starting their jobs, during their student internships, so the recruitment process was not their first contact with the institution and its wards. They had already known some members of the pedagogical staff, including those who served as internship juvenile counselors. As indicated by the narratives of the respondents, this was a significant factor

that facilitated and supported them during the adaptation period (induction into working with wards). MC took a job at an all-female facility (MOW), while FC accepted a position at a male facility (ZPiSdN). In selecting the study participants, we were particularly interested in the possibility of comparing similar situations of juvenile counselor-wards relationship. For this reason, in the characterization of the problem areas, we chose individuals who, immediately after being hired, took on the care of a selected group of wards, becoming so-called “group juvenile counselors.” This is significant because not every newly hired juvenile counselor assumes the role of a “group juvenile counselor” right after taking up the job (and therefore may not have the opportunity to build relationships within a specific group).

*Research method and applied analytical procedure* The applied research method is based on the assumptions of a qualitative (interpretative) approach (Hałas 2006), and the research procedure itself proceeded in stages and was associated with the organization of two parallel research projects<sup>2</sup>. The histories of selected cases were primarily obtained through ethnographic methods, namely participant observation (Hammerlsay, Atkinson 2000) and in-depth interviews (Angrosino 2010), as well as (auto)ethnographic narratives (Kacperczyk 2014).

The empirical material on MC’s experience comes from two main sources – an ongoing participant observation at one of the selected rehabilitation facilities and an in-depth interview conducted with the participant. The reconstruction of FC’s experience, on the other hand, constitutes a record of an (auto)ethnographic nature, recorded in the form of self-narrative observation diaries. “Raw” empirical material, i.e. the FC diaries and the MC interview transcript, as well as the observation notes, were discussed in a team discussion, with the participation of external researchers not involved in the empirical material collection process. As part of the analytical effort, the collected data was collated and compared, and key problem areas and analytical categories were identified, which were then organized and subjected to thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke 2012). Thus, the picture of counseling work presented in the following section is the sum total of a complex and multi-stage (and time-consuming) research-analytic process, integrating different perspectives of juvenile counselors’ perceptions of the social world (Strauss 1978).

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<sup>2</sup> The doctoral project carried out by Dobińska, entitled *Świat społeczny wychowawców młodzieżowych ośrodków wychowawczych* [The social world of juvenile counselors of youth education centers] under the supervision of prof. dr. hab. Krzysztof Szmidt and a scientific research project carried out by Cieślakowska-Ryczko, entitled *Konstruowanie tożsamości zawodowej oraz realizacja oddziaływań wychowawczych w męskich placówkach resocjalizacyjnych: badanie z elementami strategii (auto)etnograficznych* [Constructing Professional Identity and Implementing Educational Interventions in Male Rehabilitation Facilities: A Study with Elements of (Auto)Ethnographic Strategies].

## Results of own studies

### Formation of the juvenile counselor-group relationship

#### First contact with the supervised group

**MC:** No one introduced me, and well, I decided to conduct introductory sessions with them so I could get to know them a bit, you know (...) then the lady entered and said: this is Mr. M., he will be your counselor from now on. And that's it, that was shocking

**FC:** [Week 1–4] First contact with the supervised group, firstly the manager (in the absence of boys), showed the counselor the facilities, keys, register, corkboard, radiotelephone. On the same day, during the afternoon assembly, after finishing school activities, the boys gathered in the hallway. The juvenile counselor stood in front of the full audience – all the wards and staff present that day. All of them were looking at the counselor, smiling, nudging each other, commenting, and waiting for information. The director introduced the counselor by name (but this is not the most important thing), the most important is the information that follows the name... 'she will be the new counselor of Group X'. The decision had been made. You take over the group (whatever that means at the moment), open the door using an electromagnetic card, and enter the room with a group of boys. The door closes behind you.

As revealed in the accounts of the participants, the phase of mutual introduction between the educator and the group is not a particularly elaborate action involving many employees. On one hand, the introduction is entirely formal, but on the other hand, participation in the assembly (as in the case of FC) has a fairly ceremonial character (Bruszt 1998; Vidal-Naquet 1981; Goffman 2006). It is worth noting that neither the wards nor the juvenile counselor really have any intermediaries in this process. On the contrary, they find themselves in circumstances of self-reliance and mutual acquaintance, and although this phase seems crucial in building relationships, it also requires dynamic and spontaneous action based on improvisation. The novice not only acts alone while “on a foreign land” but also must take on the role of a leading, decisive, competent person from the very beginning. It is worth noting that both FC and MC had prior experience meeting wards in the institution, yet the initiation phase after starting their professional work was equally stressful. In the accounts of the first weeks of work, FC emphasizes that entering the group and closing the door behind her is associated with a feeling of being left alone, especially due to the nature of the facility (bars on windows, electromagnetic locks, a camera's eye, but also procedures related to mandatory locking of group doors, the inability to leave the group without justification, lists of prohibitions and orders – all of this contributes to a sense of confinement that one gradually becomes accustomed to).



## First meeting in the common room

The arrival of a newcomer, regardless of their gender, arouses interest. The first meeting with the group is, in fact, surrendering to a never-ending wave of questions. On one hand, the wards participate in the process of getting to know the newcomer (for example, through proposed workshops), but their attention is focused on the new environment. They want to know who they are dealing with, and this should come as absolutely no surprise. Both FC and MC emphasize that the wards placed great importance on the age and visual (physical) aspects of the newcomer. The series of questions asked are mainly about romantic relationships (having a partner), relationship status, having children, etc. The participants also noted that this phase was particularly significant for safeguarding their privacy, which extended beyond their stay in the institution. First and foremost, this involved blocking visibility on social media, hiding photos, and removing important information such as birthdates. It can be thought that efforts to isolate the outside world from the professional world took place as soon as they started work. As further accounts revealed, this demarcation between the professional and private worlds has been consistently maintained throughout the duration of their work.

**FC:** [Week 20–24] a group of friends, an afternoon weekend spent together. In shift work, where the schedule is prepared from month to month, it is challenging to confirm one's participation in such meetings. If you manage to attend, it is difficult to avoid uncomfortable questions for which there are no answers. Dorota is starting a new internship at an interesting foreign company, Agata is getting ready to return to work after maternity leave, Darek has changed departments, Paweł is opening a new location... At the age of 30–45, there is a lot going on in the professional life, and the topic of work is almost inevitable. Amidst all the storytelling, I consciously remain silent. First, because it is not allowed to talk about it, and second, because it is not appropriate to discuss the challenges of rehabilitation work amidst barbecue sausages and other snacks. Paradoxically, this job is not suitable for afternoon anecdotes. There is no significant progress, promotions, no "happy Fridays." Just as I don't pry into the boys' private lives, I don't share the details in the other direction either; no one peers into their closed rooms.

As revealed in the accounts of the participants, not only the employees guard the flow of information. The wards also employ various strategies to hide and mask information. Their apparent chattiness and expressiveness are actually deliberate sorting of information, aimed at both "figuring out the educator" on one hand and creating an acceptable self-image on the other.

**MC:** I introduced myself, sat down, the girls were nervous, and then, you know, they just started acting goofy, it was all through laughter and jokes. Our first sessions

were filled with laughter, and I didn't really want to show myself too much, such as that I'm just very strict about the rules or I don't really follow them at all. I was neutral, I was just gathering information about who they were, who I was working with, getting a sense of things, checking. But they teased me in jokes. Well, when someone comes on the first day, they're eager to talk about everything, but they only tell what they want to say.

According to FC and MC, a significant aspect of building a first impression is a kind of diagnosis of the stability of the counselor. The wards aim to confirm the status and role of the newcomer (whether they are a group counselor or a temporary counselor, whether they are supportive, and whether they plan to stay longer, permanently, or if it is just temporary work). At this stage, the participants experienced a crucial process of embedding and strengthening their role.

**ME:** They [the wards] observed how I behave on the first day, they didn't test the boundaries yet because it was too early; they didn't test the limits. They were simply surveying the terrain, trying to figure out who I am, how long I'll be there, whether it's temporary or permanent, basic questions like that.

As per FC's accounts, during this initial 'diagnostic' experience, she was not fully aware of how the results of this diagnosis would affect the subsequent relationship-building process. However, this experience repeated itself when, with the arrival of a large group of wards (due to the relocation caused by the closure of facilities under the new act), she was assigned to a new group, entering an unknown structure. When she entered the new group, she vaguely stated her status, noting that she has not yet been assigned as a group juvenile counselor. This uncertain and understated role made the boys reluctant to take up the activities proposed by FC in the first month of work. In fact, they made FC feel that she was not a decisive person, that nothing depended on her in the group (like sleeping arrangements), that she did not have the final say, and that key matters always needed confirmation from other counselors. At the same time, the boys did not approach her with their difficulties, treating FC as an 'outsider' who was only on duty at that moment. It was only after formally establishing her status as the group counselor, making a clear declaration, assuming specific responsibilities (e.g., applying for passes, contacting legal guardians, preparing duty schedules, responsibility for grocery shopping), and confirming information with other staff members that the mutual relationship was normalized. Not only did the boys begin to recognize the FC's decisions as binding, but, more importantly, they started to express and discuss their problems and direct various expectations related to daily life in the facility toward the counselor (e.g., 'Since you're our counselor, can you check/organize/help us with...').

## Taming the schedule

Alongside their counseling work, there is a whole world of formal and legal matters that MC and FC considered to be a significant burden complicating the adaptation process. The participants had an overwhelming sense of the dominance of the formal framework over the pedagogical work. This extended to elementary issues like adhering to a rigidly established daily schedule and time discipline (e.g., planning workshop activities in advance to prepare the residents for wards or school). Although this might seem like a trivial problem, it is important to note that the facility operates as a large interconnected ecosystem, and any delay in the planned schedule affects other areas, including internal security (e.g., delayed mealtime disrupts the work of the guard who is responsible for supervising specific areas of the facility at that time).

To become accustomed to and overcome these difficulties, the participants employed almost identical coping strategies (e.g., taking notes of the schedule, planning all activities in advance, and closely monitoring time, asking other staff members about unclear matters). Nevertheless, they were not able to completely eliminate errors, mainly because the wards took advantage of this period of organizational chaos. As MC pointed out, the female wards, when it suited them, assumed the role of helpful hostesses. They introduced the newcomer, showed him around the center, and suggested how to organize and follow the plan. On the other hand, a common experience for both MC and FC was a certain degree of ‘stretching the rules’ and deceit. The wards, bored with the institutional life, sought various ways to break free from the institutional grip, and the counselors’ lack of knowledge provided a space for ‘breaking the rules.’ The wards – both boys and girls – saw an opportunity to avoid their duties or engage in activities they would not typically be able to do with another juvenile counselor.

**MC:** For example, there was this thing, like... at the beginning, they asked if I would go to the store with them. It was a time when, well, there weren’t really any group outings for walks or to the store. I didn’t know exactly what the girls needed, it was just a way to get out of there and do some shopping, sometimes not necessarily necessary shopping because I didn’t know back then that the wards had to provide a receipt, so we would know what they were spending it on, so it wouldn’t be something prohibited, they’d show it like that...

**FC:** [Week 1–4] today we cheerfully gave ourselves some slack, Friday afternoon, day care activities, TV recreation, gym activities. Everything seemed to be going according to plan, as if... because the boys, taking advantage of my lack of knowledge about the duty schedule for the kitchen, somehow “overlooked” their task, and as a result, we didn’t go to “peel potatoes.” This way, another group, under the supervision of another counselor, had an “extra task” [each group has a so-called kitchen duty, where the boys peel potatoes needed to prepare lunch for all the facility groups].

## **Formal, regulatory dominance over counselor-ward relationship**

The dominance of regulations and formalities had another burdensome dimension and was associated with an experience of breakdown, disagreement, and crisis in the counseling work undertaken. This experience was identified by both MC and FC and was linked to a disagreement with paradoxical solutions, action patterns, norms, and regulations that contradicted the idea of pedagogical work.

MC: According to the law, we should (...) say no, but we can somehow change it so that it is legal, but so that she is also satisfied. (...) At certain times, constantly saying 'no' is, well, in my opinion, provoking sometimes. These are people, (...) they have their needs; we can't forbid them everything. Unfortunately, our law says 'no' to most things.

FC: [Week 12] The tendency is not to give very good grades for daily behavior. To earn a very good grade, you have to do very well, so it's hard to say what to do in an isolated institution with a closed, rigid, and unchanging program of action, without a real opportunity to 'shine'. Senior staff members taught me that "a ward starts with a correct grade", and to get a good grade, they have to be outstandingly well-behaved (?), and of course many of them are below correct. Inappropriate and reprehensible behavior is common, it doesn't impress anyone (especially those who don't care anyway). I don't know who these boxes and grades are for. They contribute nothing to an actual counseling relationship, they indicate nothing, signal nothing. From my perspective, they don't provide any real information to the juvenile counselor, who spends the whole day with the group and knows much more about the context of a particular behavior than a single numerical mark in the register.

It should be emphasized that the attitude of the participants, as well as the sense of dissonance and crisis, is related to an awareness of their role MC and FC – as observations show – preferred a similar style of counseling activities. They eagerly searched for new solutions, appealed to the potential of the wards, reflected on their work, which may significantly affect the similarity of attitudes towards the institutional reality they encountered, which cannot be prepared for in the course of academic education.

## **Will we allow a woman to boss around here?**

Taking into account the "male" and "female" differentiating aspect of the participants' experiences, it is worth noting a certain "diminished position of women" from the perspective of the boy wards. There is no experience of a certain degradation caused solely by gender in the accounts of MC. Female juvenile counselor often encountered comments (made directly or indirectly) expressing reluctance to submit to "female decisions and advice". The residents most often responded

to FC's clear and non-negotiable commands and requests with comments like "unbelievable, a woman tells me what to do." Although some of these comments were humorous and ironic, they recurred regularly not only in the early stages of work but also later on.

FC: [Week 48] A new male juvenile counselor joins the staff, who, like any other new counselor, navigates through the formal and regulatory chaos. Talked by the boys into delayed going to the dining hall or using the gym during hours designated for other duties... and similar things, just like any other newcomer. During the so-called 'quiet night hours,' the boys persistently convince the newcomer that they have 'extended TV time' (they don't go to bed). The situation continues for five, ten, thirty minutes... the noise, amusement, and interest of other groups grow. I don't want to undermine his authority, but I discreetly walk in and give a clear signal that TV time ended 30 minutes ago. After a long shift, the newcomer, somewhat flustered (which is not surprising), starts directing the boys to their bedrooms and turns off the TV. The boys disperse in dissatisfaction, comment, K. calls out from the other end of the corridor to the newcomer – Why do you allow her to come in and boss you around!

The experience of "being a woman who is bossing around" in a male-dominated world gradually diminishes over time. As FC points out, many boys, in her opinion, are more reluctant to comply with decisions made by a woman than by a male juvenile counselor. Of course, in negotiations, the wards employ a different repertoire of arguments and adjust their speaking style, but they often not only express reluctance to submit to female decisions but also hold the belief that 'certain matters can only be resolved with men, and there's no point in bringing up these issues with a woman.'

On the other hand, as MC reports, there are also female topics in the female world in which the male participant did not feel comfortable. However, in the male juvenile counselor-female wards relationship, it is not the group that tabooizes specific issues but the counselor himself who chooses to withdraw from areas understood as feminine or intimate.

MC: one of them says she needs something, we go to the storeroom where all this stuff is kept, like school supplies, some chemical products, cosmetics and other feminine stuff. She cannot find what she needs, so we have to replenish it. Well, one of them feels unwell, well, if someone feels unwell, you know, everyone is different, and one of them feels unwell, right? Secondly, there are also feminine issues that need to be respected, so I don't make them tell me what the problem is, there are many unknowns.

### **Male and female elements in an isolated world**

Considering that sexuality (understood in this broad sense) is an inseparable need and element of human life (Bancroft 2011), the aspect of sexual identity and

corporeality is inseparably entangled in the counseling relationship. How to talk about corporeality, how to react to discussions about corporeality and sexuality, what topics to address to meet the expectations and areas of ignorance of the wards? Inevitably, these questions are accompanied by a certain asymmetrical structure of the establishments, where female staff dominates in female MOW institutions (usually the counseling group consists of 3 juvenile counselors: 2 women + 1 man). In the case of male juvenile institutions, male staff predominates, and women make up a minority. It sometimes happens that boys do not have any contact with a female counselor/supervisor for a long time. Therefore, the appearance of a counselor of the opposite sex seems 'attractive' for engaging in discussions and various interactions revolving around issues of gender identity, sexuality, attractiveness, physicality, etc.

How did the participants characterize the problem? MC noticed that girls in his presence are eager to draw attention to their attractiveness (through clothing, hairstyles, makeup, etc.). MC observes that during his shifts, the female residents behave differently than in the presence of other juvenile counselors. Girls seek and expect compliments and recognition in the eyes of men, and they try to satisfy this need through interaction with the counselor.

This aspect, of course, is also indifferent in the case of a female juvenile counselor in a male counseling group. However, in this role, the relationship of "adoration and recognition" takes a different direction. Boys do not necessarily expect compliments, but constantly pay attention to bodily aspects, making various comments about clothing, beauty, figure, etc. These comments – as FC points out – are not always positive; they often tend to be inappropriate or offensive (e.g., you look ugly with that makeup, wow, you really went all out today [regarding clothes], you've put on weight, etc.). A woman in the role of juvenile counselor constantly has to contend with this wave of 'unsolicited information' about herself. As FC pointed out, comments heard were often the basis for group discussions about gender relations and language etiquette.

The phase of heightened adoration is particularly evident in the first few months of work. Over time, the image (person) of the juvenile counselor neutralizes. The woman's image shifts from a woman to that of an 'old aunt,' and the man's image transitions into that of 'a cool uncle.' The main difference between FC and MC lies in how they dealt with this adoration phase, which is focused on physicality and sexuality. MC somewhat deferred the cessation of these behaviors. While he did not cross any boundaries, he also did not react in a firm and forceful manner to various comments made by female wards. It can be assumed that he allowed signals of adoration without explicitly setting boundaries, emphasizing that it is the basis for building sympathy and acceptance of his presence, familiarizing the girls with the presence of a man in their environment. FC handled the experience quite differently. In her opinion, it was necessary to forcefully and unequivocally set boundaries, cutting off and responding clearly

to comments of a sexual or physical nature and addressing such behaviors with appropriate guidance. She stressed that in an institution like ZPiSdN, there are young men with various dysfunctions, and in this highly masculinized group, there are also juvenile sex offenders. In these circumstances, she considered it effective and necessary to set very clear and consistent guidelines for wards regarding their behavior towards a female counselor. She also emphasized that adoring behaviors cannot be completely eliminated and persist throughout the entire period of work, especially when a new ward arrives at the institution

## Summary

As can be seen from the above accounts, many aspects of “becoming” a rehabilitation counselor were common to FC and MC. They both emphasized the ceremonial and challenging entry into the group environment, as well as key points such as establishing their own position and solidifying and normalizing their role as group counselors. They both entered an environment dominated by a certain gender and, as representatives of the opposite gender, they noticed aspects related to this experience. First and foremost, it is important to deal with the intense phase of adoration. FC decided to unequivocally suppress this phase (viewing it as an element of building security), whereas MC saw it as a potential that was worth consciously controlling and gradually extinguishing. If any taboo topics arose, it is worth noting the direction of passing over in silence. In the case of the boys in the relationship with the female juvenile counselor, they were the ones who set the boundary of what can and cannot be said to a woman, deciding on topics that were passed over in silence and tabooed. In the case of a relationship between the male counselor and a girls’ group, MC withdrew from topics he considered intimate or embarrassing (e.g., related to menstruation). At the same time, it should be noted that a woman dominated in a male world, according to MC, experienced more invalidation of her role and decision-making authority, going through additional steps to achieve the normalization of her status.

Regardless of the difficulties faced, it is important to consider the role played by supporting individuals (other counselors in the environment of the participants) and the prior experiences gained during student internships. The adaptation phase is rapid and dynamic, somewhat ceremonial, which means that there is no space and time for slow taming and embedding in the counseling situation. Although one cannot fully prepare for the role of a social rehabilitation counselor, building professional relationships by entering the environment before starting work provides a valuable foundation for overcoming difficulties, especially in the early stages of professional development. Furthermore, an important conclusion drawn from the analyses conducted is the need for a reflection on modifying the rehabilitation counselor training program. Recognizing the priority of preparing

students for working with minors, ensuring practical support, and providing knowledge about the consequences of applied counseling measures, as well as shedding light on the process of becoming a counselor from the perspective of young counselors, would enable novices to enter the professional world with greater self-awareness.

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