

## The work of a probation officer: Does personality matter?

*Stress in the work of a probation officer. A theoretical and empirical study.* Łukasz Wirkus, Impuls, Kraków 2015, 226 pp.

Data collected by the World Health Organization indicate that a great number of people who are professionally active feel continuously liable to various stress determinants in their work. Focusing on the convicted and on people on probation and, at the same time, completely neglecting the personnel working with the convicts or former convicts and the workload the staff experiences as a result of their service is specific not only to the Polish but also to the English-language literature. That is why it needs to be emphasized that Łukasz Wirkus's book is the first thorough Polish study of the issue of probation officers' job stress, even more valuable if we consider the fact that it is an empirical study. The author stresses that the relation between a probation officer and their subject is a very peculiar one, often burdened by enormous individual costs. It is connected with the nature of probation officers' work, but their personality traits, which influence the effectiveness of the undertaken tasks, are also extremely important in this context.

In 2015, Łukasz Wirkus's monograph titled "Stress in the work of a probation officer. A theoretical and empirical study" was published, and it filled a noticeable gap in the literature as well as marking out the direction for the discussion on the state of probation officers' work organization, and recommended a number of practical implications. The author is an assistant professor at the Institute of Pedagogy and Social Work of the Pomeranian University in Słupsk and a probation specialist at the District Court in Słupsk. He is also an author of publications and a coeditor of monographs on the functioning of Polish Probation Offices in the judicial system, broadly defined social incompatibility and psychosocial determinants for self-harming behaviors in penitentiary isolation. Such professional experiences add new perspective to his work on personality issues.

The reviewed monograph consists of two parts. The first part, *Multidimensional image of the work of probation officers*, includes three chapters and discusses the work of probation officers, broadly analyses the

issue of professional identity and presents theoretical concepts of job stress, which continuously draws the attention of researchers analyzing personality issues. The second part, *Identification of the sources and consequences of job stress* (two chapters), is an exposition of the results of a nationwide study concerning the conditions of job stress and its psychosocial consequences in the work of probation officers. The monograph is provided with an impressive bibliography including over 300 references from Polish and foreign literature.

The author draws our attention to organizational solutions that have concerned Prison Service officers since 2009, with emphasis on the regulation on occupational health services in organizational units of Prison Service and on the tasks of the occupational health services resulting from the specificity of the occupational risk. The regulation specifies the actions of the occupational health services in the process of identifying the service conditions for protecting officers health from the influence of unfavorable conditions connected with work environment and ways of performing duties. The Probation Court Services do not have any analogous organizational solutions in the regulations of law in force.

In the first part, the author presents the current organizational state of the probation services and their tasks and analyses the process of developing their present organizational model (pp. 21-30). In the second chapter, the author raises the topic of occupational identity of probation officers and refers to the concept of identity by Castells (p. 39), Kwiatkowska, Giddens (p. 40), Bauman, Brzezińska, Mikulska (p. 41), Kieszowska, Konopczyński (p. 42), and Węgliński, Utrat-Milecki (p. 43). The author also addresses the issue of the profession of public trust in the context of probation officers and the issue of the functioning of the probation self-government.

Another analyzed issue is the staff selection procedure for the position of a probation officer. The Council of Europe recommends *researching staff activities*, suggesting that it is possible to improve the activities of probation services by using better methods of

recruitment, selection, training, work organization, motivation and occupational guidance for probation officers. Łukasz Wirkus presents an interesting organizational and training solution which is a formula for improving the effectiveness of probation and penitentiary services as well as for ensuring effective cooperation between these two services by using the possibility of delegating employees from one of them in order to undergo training in the other service. Such secondment should, however, take place only with the consent of the person concerned and be of temporary nature, and should not result in a formal change of the employee's status. The recommendations state that *the period of a secondment, which should not be equivalent to a permanent job change, ought to be determined pursuant to the aim or aims of the secondment*, which emphasizes the identity and organizational distinction of probation and penitentiary services (p. 65). In his considerations, the author introduces references to Ciosek, who, in the context of occupational selection and training, indicates the need for broadening the research on the personality traits of Prison Service officers. Ciosek emphasizes the officers' attitudes towards punishment, the institution they work for, professional role, their subjects and social rehabilitation, and refers to Goma-i-Freixanet, who performed an evaluation of people professionally taking risks for pro-community reasons (rescue workers, police officers, prison officers, fire fighters, security guards) and created a personality profile of a person (a woman or a man) professionally dealing with social actions (pp. 65-66). As a result of the theoretical and empirical analysis, the author has designed a selection procedure scheme of probation officers (p. 69). An important chapter of the book is the issue of professional competencies, in which the author refers to Ostrowska's deliberations about the effectiveness of a probation officer's work, the factors determining it and the universal personality traits of a probation officer (pp. 74-75). Łukasz Wirkus writes about the effectiveness determinants of probation services while referring to Jedynek, who noted an important dependence in the sphere of social rehabilitation effectiveness and claims that *even the most professional and methodologically correct actions of a probation officer cannot balance the negative influence of so-called 'liabilities' of his subjects which lie in their personality as well as their nearest and further environment* (p. 77). According to probation officers, one of the most onerous stress factors is working with people with mental disorders. The author extensively presents the recommendations concerning work methodology formulated by Pastwa-Wojciechowska, which are about precise expression of the personality of the participant of social rehabilitation interactions which, in turn, conditions the selection of effective methods of educational work and therapy. That is why it is so important to enhance clinical knowledge

in improving professional qualifications, which determines new areas of psychological diagnostics and, as a result, requires specialist diagnostic skills (pp. 77-78). On the other hand, Konopczyński perceives a probation officer's professional development on the front of social rehabilitation pedagogy as a result of a few factors, namely: factors of educational nature, multiplicity of methodological solutions, practical experiences and personal factors (p. 78).

The author also mentions the practical aspects of the functioning of probation officers in the area of professional conduct, which is made more detailed by a broad literature study and the Council of Europe recommendations (pp. 82-91).

In the next chapter, the author analyses the phenomenon of job stress. He presents its organizational sources and correlates resulting from the review of psychological studies, and some psychological concepts of stress. Łukasz Wirkus also presents real dangers in the work of probation officers based on the statistical analysis of the National Chamber of Probation Officers as well as Holyst and Wojtera's research concerning probation officers' safety (pp. 111-114). Łukasz Wirkus describes the consequences of job stress, namely, the burnout syndrome and other health problems (pp. 115-122), often associated with personality traits.

The second (empirical) part of the book, *Identification of the sources of job stress and its consequences*, includes two chapters. The author presents methodological assumptions of the study and its implementation as well as his own research tool – the *Probation Officers' Stress Questionnaire* (pp. 141-151).

The author performed an empirical analysis of the results of the research on the structure of probation officers' job stress (pp. 153-176) in the context of organizational and sociodemographic variables such as the type of verdicts they enforce, their position, gender, marital status, education and others. Łukasz Wirkus carried out a statistical analysis of the influence of each variable on the level of job stress and, as a result, diagnosed the most important risk factors in the work of a probation officer, including: the overall level of job stress, job dissatisfaction, the style of managing probation officers, organizational load, cooperation with the court and contacts with the subjects.

This part of the book ends with two subchapters which refer to the issue of probation officers' health condition and burnout syndrome (pp. 176-193). The statistical analysis conducted by the author allows him to formulate a general description of the burnout correlates in the studied group of prison officers. The author quotes some up-to-date studies on the probation officers' burnout correlates and predictors. Łukasz Wirkus refers to Piotrowski's studies conducted among the officers of the Prison Services. Piotrowski characterized the burnout correlates in the context

of psychological, organizational and demographical variables in detail. His research shows that the psychological variables have the greatest influence on the development of burnout and that the Prison Services officers whose level of burnout is very high are nervous and excessively excited, have a tendency to relive negative emotions, and demonstrate a low level of life optimism and social compliance. Prison officers, similarly to probation officers, declare that they feel burdened and lack job satisfaction, and they perceive the style of managing their penitentiary unit as wrong. The fundamental source of mental burdens is contacts with prisoners. A typical burnt-out officer is a person with two- to five-year professional experience, usually a man, which is different than in the case of probation officers, who are mostly women and whose burnout is typically observed when they are 38-48 years old or have 26-40 years of experience. It is worth emphasizing that probation officers do not have a statutory right to early retirement, whereas prison officers do possess such a privilege. The author also discusses the results of Korczyńska's study concerning the most important burnout correlates, which include: job stress and its social, situational and organizational determinants; lack of social support; external locus of control; style of coping by avoidance, which is concentrated on emotions; variables of demographic nature (e.g. marital status, religion); and personality factors, including individual predispositions (pp. 187-190).

The research results and the practical implications formulated by Łukasz Wirkus should be a reason for

considering the multidimensional character of the problems in probation officers' work in Poland as well as a stimulus for well-considered organizational solutions. The author postulates introducing a few systemic solutions, including the creation and introduction of a regulation on the occupational health services in the organizational units of the Probation Court Services and on the tasks of the occupational health services resulting from the nature of job risk, the creation of a new occupational selection system, the creation of the post of a Probation Court Services spokesperson at the central level, as well as promotion activities and support for the foundations, associations and other organizations which can contribute to the further consolidation of the professional position of probation officers (pp. 199-200). The studies conducted by the author emphasize the role of personality factors in work of the officers of the Prison Services, which is the subject rarely analyzed in the psychological literature.

The book is worth recommending for people working in the Probation Court Services, especially if they deal with the probation officers' work organization. It should also be on the compulsory reading list for students of social rehabilitation pedagogy, and court and penitentiary psychology, as well as those who are planning on taking up the position of a probation officer.

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