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Prison staff at risk of professional burnout diagnosis of the phenomenon

Abstract: The aim of the pilot study was to establish the scale of the professional burnout risk for prison officers and to analyze what factors may be associated with the burnout risk. It was important in this case to determine what styles and strategies of coping are used by the respondents and how this may affect the level and scale of burnout. What is the level of anxiety of the subjects? The sense of self-efficacy and satisfaction with life was important for the evaluation of the well-being of the surveyed employees.

The sense of social support is also important for the evaluation of the burnout risk, so the evaluation of support and its correlation with the professional burnout of the prison officers surveyed was included among the cognitive objectives. The research used the following questionnaires: the Maslach Burnout Inventory, STAI Questionnaire – State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, CISS Questionnaire – Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations, COPE Questionnaire – Multi-dimensional Inventory to Measure Stress Management, GSES – General Self-Efficacy Scale, SWLS – Satisfaction With Life Scale, SSQSR – Social Support Questionnaire. The results of the pilot studies showed that, in the group of 30 security officers from two prisons, the level of burnout is moderate. Depersonalization is marked as the strongest. Their behavior is characterized by a high level of anxiety while using task-based coping styles and active strategies. Self-efficacy and satisfaction with life remain at an average level. The social support received is not fully satisfactory. No correlation was found between these variables and professional burnout of the subjects.

Keywords: Professional burnout, professional stress, prison, prison officers, coping styles and strategies, social support.

Introduction

The term "professional burnout" is increasingly recognizable and present in social life. The subject of burnout is increasingly mentioned not only in scientific publications and articles, but also in the media – television, radio or the press. However, there are still areas where there is little research into the burnout of employees' energy; new burnout models are still emerging, and this issue, although always current, is not publicized enough to prevent the phenomenon, not only in the most popular support-related professions, in which professional burnout is inscribed to some extent, but also in those less popular ones which are on the margins of professional and social prestige.

Professional burnout refers to a number of factors influencing the appearance of mental and physical fatigue, chronic (slow or, on the contrary, rapid) exhaustion of energy and resources of a person. Exhaustion of energy is most often caused by difficulties that a person encounters in his/her everyday work, usually connected with the so-called "support" area. Professional burnout concerns mainly people who in their professional work are exposed to a number of factors and difficulties resulting from care, rehabilitation, assistance, teaching other people and social rehabilitation (Pane, 2016; Bringas-Molleda et al., 2015).

Professional burnout was described for the first time in 1974 by Freudenberger, who pointed out a number of specific behaviors which are determinants of this phenomenon. Among them he mentioned irritability, the feeling of chronic fatigue, discouragement, mood swings, frequent headaches, a state of deepening apathy, as well as increased susceptibility to diseases (Freudenberger 1974). Soon the subject of burnout was dealt with by other researchers. In 1981, Maslach and Jackson analyzed the process of burnout of energy of those who help others. This research contributed to the creation of a multidimensional structure of professional burnout, which consists of: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a sense of reduced personal achievement (Maslach, Jackson, 1981). The basis for the burnout in the concept of Maslach et al. (1986, 1997) is believed to be interpersonal requirements resulting from support relationships, causing emotional overload. Interpersonal contacts according to Maslach et al. are difficult and constitute a considerable mental burden for support-givers (social service workers, police officers, prison staff, teachers, medical staff), and the burnout syndrome which appears in these people is associated with a lack of coping skills and insufficient social support. The relationships at work, such as lack of understanding on the part of superiors and bureaucratic administration, also play an important role. All these elements additionally cause stress and are the causative factor of the burnout, as the adaptation processes to the professional environment collapse. This in turn causes malfunctioning at work and a secondary decrease in professional efficiency.

A typical symptom of professional burnout syndrome is a change of attitude towards the recipient from positive to negative. This leads to depersonalization, characterized by a lack of understanding, aversion or indifference to the recipient. Negative perception of the recipient causes a decrease in the quality of care, gradually resulting in a feeling of ever lower personal achievements. It should be stressed that there are many theories explaining the etiology of burnout. Apart from the already mentioned theory of Maslach and Jackson (1981), it is worth noting others. Pines (1993, 1996) claims that the source of burnout is frustration about the sense of involvement in work. Burisch (1993) assumes that the cause of burnout is the loss of autonomy and the resulting disrupted episodes of action. Sęk (2000) claims that burnout occurs under the influence of stress, unmodified by remedial action. Hobfoll (2006), on the other hand, locates the sources of burnout in deficits or misuse of personal and social resources. These explanations are not mutually exclusive, as they cover processes that are in mutual relations.

As shown by the results of the research (Pane, 2016; Bonini Campos et al., 2016; Lambert et al. 2002, 2010, 2015), the problem of professional burnout concerns a large group of employees of the penitentiary system. Working in the police or penitentiary is a very stressful job and, as researchers (Benetti et al. 2018) write, it is unhealthy, dangerous, causes constant emotional tension and conflict between work and personal life. Prison staff therefore belong to a group that is highly vulnerable to stress and professional burnout (Bonini Campos et al., 2016). This situation makes it necessary to use different ways of coping. According to researchers, these are not always rational ways of coping. Police officers or prison staff abuse alcohol or drugs (Ballenger et al., 2011). In the population of 747 police officers surveyed, 18.1% of men and 15.9% of women reported having experienced negative effects of alcohol consumption and 7.8% of the sample met the criteria for lifetime alcohol abuse or addiction. In turn, a survey conducted by Bonini Campos et al. (2016) among 339 prison officers allowed to conclude that 22.4% of the respondents were struggling with risky behaviors related to alcohol consumption. In 14.6% of the surveyed officers, professional burnout was confirmed. In the population of 222 officers surveyed by Brigas-Mollede et al. (2015), it was found that the subjects are at risk of depression, and their behavior is dominated by strong emotional exhaustion, which manifests itself in concentration disorders, low self-esteem, sense of meaninglessness and indifference. The subjects had a strong sense of pressure from the need to deal with prisoners and a sense of constant tension and vigilance associated with pressure at work. This in turn, combined with a low sense of satisfaction, reduced productivity at work. Roy and Avdija (2012), based on the analysis of a study by multiple authors, concluded that a study conducted in the United States predicts an approximate percentage of burnout among prison staff. They found that approximately 64% of Kentucky penitentiary staff, 33% of Alabama penitentiary staff and 17% of Illinois prison educational instructors

have experienced professional burnout. In turn, according to research by Pane (2016), 4100 employees of penal institutions in Albania indicate a very serious problem of burnout, especially on a subscale – depersonalization, which suggests a cynical, dehumanized treatment of prisoners and may lead to a deterioration in the situation of employees, due to poor relations with prisoners.

The Polish penitentiary system is subject to the same rules of operation as the systems of European Union countries and other countries outside the EU. This allows the assumption that the officers working there are also exposed to severe stress and the risk of burnout. According to Sygit-Kowalkowska, Weber-Rajek et al. (2017, p. 86) *"prison service is a dispositional formation, based on orders, confronting employees with highly stressful events and threats to health and life. Officers perform their service in lockdown, under strict, formalized control established by their superiors"*.

Prison staff are subject to a number of situations that cause a lot of stress. The most serious ones include: overload resulting from availability, multi-shifting, prevailing official relations based on a military pattern, rigid regulations requiring their absolute observance. This is accompanied by authoritarian management due to the paramilitary nature of the Prison Service and an objectified treatment of staff that can translate into the same treatment of prisoners – which affects the whole climate of the organization (cf. Czekaj, 2015; Piotrowski, 2010).

Another important factor is a low sense of effectiveness of social rehabilitation measures, informal relations between employees – rivalry, conflicts resulting from hierarchy. In conclusion, it is worth adding after Pomiankiewicz (2010, p. 50––51) that *"an important, and sometimes overlooked or underestimated, source of stress, and thus the risk of burnout (note by MS) is a negative image of a Prison Service officer in public opinion, perpetuating stereotypes, created mainly by the media, on the basis of negative information (escape, mutiny, suicidal death of a prisoner, corruption in the service). This often gives rise to superficial, malicious, often unjustified judgments and ungrounded generalizations. This deepens the already high frustration of the staff (the already proverbial saying: "jailer – a profession you don't dream of as a child")*.

Methodological assumptions of own research

The theoretical assumptions presented above were the starting point for the author's own research. Its general aim was to establish, in pilot study, the scale of the professional burnout risk for prison officers and to analyze what factors may be associated with the burnout risk. It was important in this case to determine what styles and strategies of coping are used by the respondents and how this may affect the level and scale of burnout. What is the level of anxiety of the subjects? The sense of self-efficacy and satisfaction with life was important for the evaluation of the well-being of the surveyed employees.

The sense of social support is also important for the evaluation of the burnout risk, so the evaluation of support and its correlation with the professional burnout of the prison officers surveyed was included among the cognitive objectives.

The objectives set allowed to put forward the following research problems:
— What is the risk of professional burnout among the Penitentiary officers surveyed ?
— What is the level of anxiety (as a trait and state) in the officers surveyed?
— What styles of coping are used by the officers surveyed?
— What are the most common coping strategies used by the officers surveyed?
— What is the sense of self-efficiency among the Penitentiary officers surveyed?
— What is the satisfaction of life of the officers surveyed?

Since the studies are diagnostic in nature and are pilot studies carried out on a relatively small research group, no hypotheses were made.

In the study, a diagnostic survey method was used, applying the following research tools:
— Maslach Burnout Inventory as adapted by Geldern and Schenke (Fengler 2000: 91);
   A tool designed to evaluate three burnout coefficients: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and self-assessment of one's own capabilities. It contains 22 questions on the quantitative assessment of the burnout risk and is based on the sum of the positive answers on the scale of emotional exhaustion (WE) and depersonalization (DP) and the negative answers on the scale of the assessment of one's own capabilities (OM).
— STAI Questionnaire – State-Trait Anxiety Inventory – in the Polish adaptation of Spielberger, Strelau, Tysarczyk and Wrześniewski;
   STAI is a tool designed to study anxiety understood as a transient and situational state of an individual and anxiety understood as a relatively constant personality trait. STAI consists of two sub scales, one of which (X-1) measures anxiety as a state and the other (X-2) measures anxiety as a trait. Each subscale consists of 20 items to which the respondent answers by selecting one of four categorized answers.
— CISS Questionnaire – Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations in the adaptation of Szczepaniak, Strelau and Wrześniewski;
   The CISS consists of 48 statements about different behaviors that people can take in stressful situations. Subjects have to determine on a five-point scale the frequency of given behavior in stressful, difficult situations. Scores are formatted in three scales: SSZ – task-oriented style; SSE – emotion-oriented style; SSU –avoidant style. The latter can be divided into ACZ – distraction seeking, and PKT – social diversion.
— COPE Questionnaire – Multidimensional Inventory to Measure Stress Management – as adapted by Jurczyński and Ogińska-Bulik;
   It is a self-written tool consisting of 60 statements, which are answered on a 4-level scale. It allows for the evaluation of 15 stress response strategies.

These strategies are: Active Coping, Planning, Seeking Instrumental Support, Seeking Emotional Support, Avoiding Competitive Actions, Turning to Religion, Positive Revaluation and Development, Refraining from Action, Acceptance, Focusing on Emotions and their Venting, Denial, Distraction, Discontinuing Action, Taking Alcohol or Other Psychoactive Drugs, Sense of Humor.

— GSES Questionnaire – Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale – in the Polish version of Schwarzer, Jerusalem and Jurczyński;

GSES consists of 10 statements that are part of one factor. It measures the strength of an individual's overall belief in the effectiveness of coping with difficult situations and obstacles. It is designed to examine healthy and ill people.

— SWLS Questionnaire – Satisfaction With Life Scale – in the Polish adaptation of Jurczyński;

SWLS is designed for individual and group surveying of healthy and ill adults. The scale contains five statements. The respondent assesses the extent to which each of them relates to his/her previous life. The result of the measurement is an overall indicator of the sense of satisfaction with life.
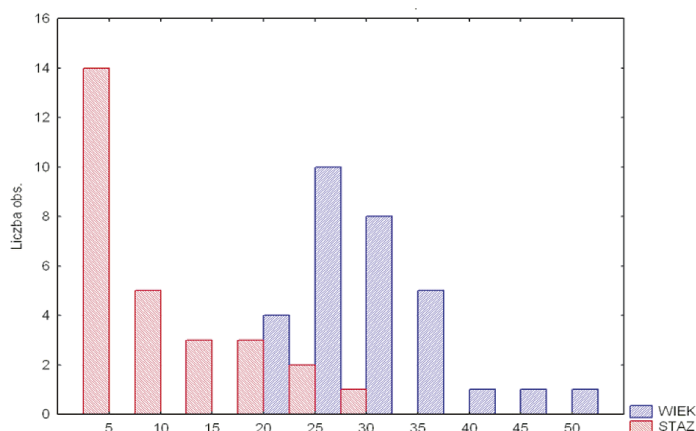
— SSQSR – Social Support Questionnaire – in the Polish adaptation of Zalewski, Obłój, Skuza and Wrześniewski;

The tool consists of two sub-scales assessing subjective evaluation of social support: SSQSR 1 – the number of people providing support and SSQSR 2 – the strength of satisfaction with the received social support.

The pilot study involved 30 officers of the security division from two penitentiaries: The Penitentiary in Wołów and the Penitentiary No. 1 in Wrocław. These were people (28 men and 2 women) aged 22–52 years, average age 33 years old. 17 people had a secondary education and 13 had higher education. Seniority of the respondents: 2–29 years, on average 9 years of work in the profession.

The statistical calculations presented in the text were performed using the Statistica package ver. 9.1.

Table 1. Age and seniority of respondents (N=30)

Research results

The evaluation of professional burnout of prison officers was carried out using the Maslach Burnout Inventory as adapted by Geldern and Schenke. The results obtained for emotional exhaustion (WE), depersonalization (DP) and self-assessment of one's own capabilities (OM) gave a picture of moderate burnout of the employees surveyed. These were respectively: for emotional exhaustion (WE) – average values of 17% with a maximum of 67% for a surveyed female prison officer. Significantly higher results were observed for depersonalization (DP), with average values for the surveyed population at 27%. Maximum: 80% were obtained for 5 people, high, 60% were obtained for 2 people. In the scale of one's own capabilities the results are promising, with average values for the surveyed population at 76%, and maximum values, 100%, for 9 people. The general burnout rate among the 30 prison officers surveyed was 23%. The highest values concerned 7 people; what is interesting, but also alarming, such values were obtained for the youngest officers from the security division.
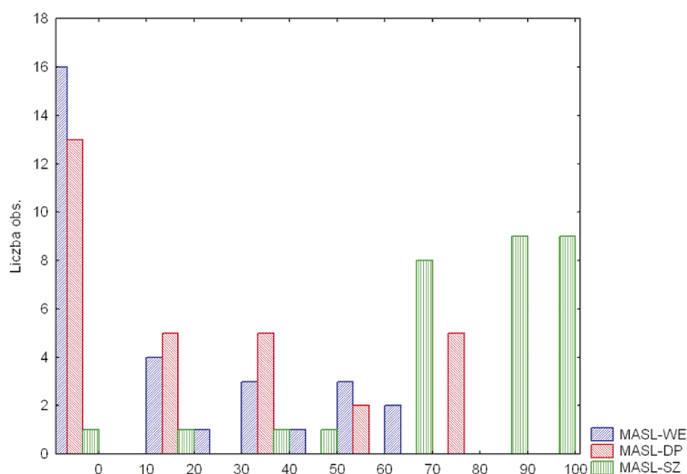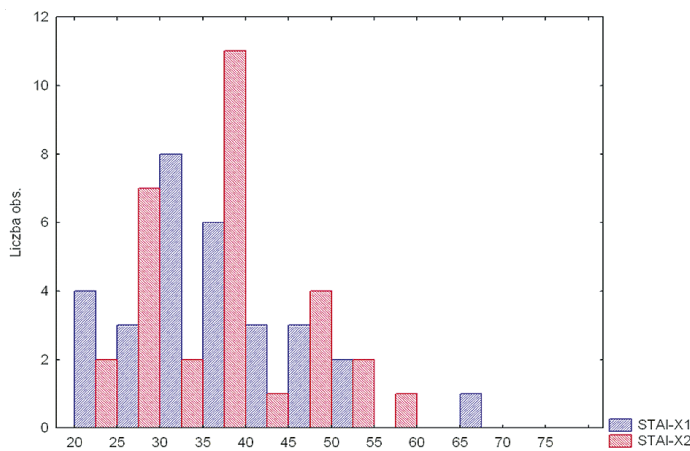

Table 2. Burnout values for individual sub-scales: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, own capabilities

A high level of self-esteem may also indicate that the respondents have an inadequate belief in their own capabilities. It is worth recalling here the words of Maslach and Leiter (2011, p. 47): *"the joy of success compensates the bitterness of failures, regardless of whether the successes are significant achievements or small but daily praise from others. But when the positive feelings fade away to the point where they can no longer compensate the negative ones, cynicism appears with all its strength".* This statement translates into a high level of depersonalization, as

shown by the results of the survey in this sub-scale, with a relatively low level of emotional exhaustion.

The study also assessed the level of anxiety of the officers surveyed. Badania Bringas-Molledy et al. (2015) indicate the importance of this factor as a moderator of professional burnout of penitentiary staff. The analysis carried out allowed to conclude that the level of anxiety as a trait and as a state in the subjects is high.

Table 3. Values of STAI-X1 (anxiety as a state) and STAI-X2 (anxiety as a trait)

Average values for the surveyed population: STAI-X1 37.6, median 36.0 (high scores) and STAI-X2 37.23, median 37.0 (high scores), as shown in Table 3.
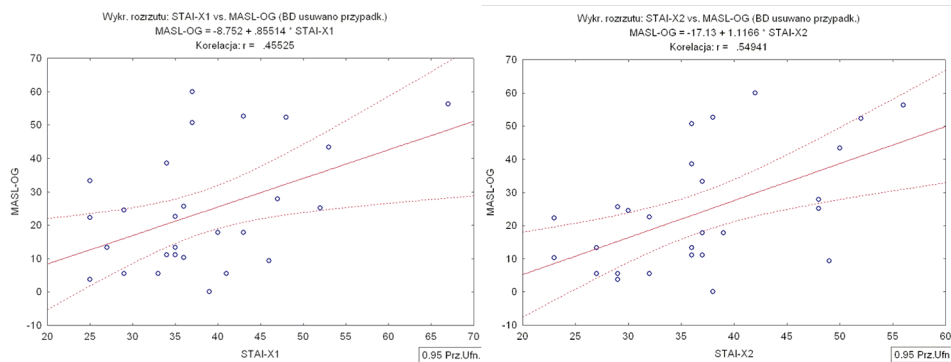

Chart 1. Correlation between general professional burnout and level of anxiety STAI-X1 and STAI-X2

The results obtained led to the analysis of relations between individual burnout factors and the level of anxiety as an emotional state (STAI-X1) and as a personality trait (STAI-X2). This is an important analysis, as a high level of

anxiety may indicate serious adaptation problems in a stressful situation, and thus a risk of burnout.

The study shows that there is a positive correlation with the overall burnout outcome in both sub-scales of anxiety, as a trait and as a state.

The results obtained may be, on the one hand, a consequence of personal predispositions, on the other hand, of the specificity of the profession and difficulties connected with the work of a prison officer. It is worth recalling here the results of research by Mercz-Kot and Cembrzyńska (2008), in which the authors stress the importance of the relations prevailing in the prison as an organization. As it turns out, the officers of the penitentiary system are exposed to mobbing from superiors and colleagues. The researchers analyzed the situation of 222 officers in this respect. As it turned out (Mercz-Kot, Cebrzyńska, 2008, p. 446), *"among socially unaccepted, hostile behaviors which Prison Service officers experienced on the part of their co-workers, backbiting was most often reported (35% of respondents). The officers surveyed also indicated that in the service they experience the following unacceptable behaviors on the part of their colleagues: making malicious comments and jokes (20%), gossiping about a given person (19%), questioning an employee's opinion on matters they are experienced in (15%), making many unfriendly comments by colleagues about the private life, appearance and/or character traits of a given person (14%), and criticizing regardless of the effects of work (13%). Aggressive behaviors, which Prison Service officers experienced the least frequently on the part of their co-workers, included: inciting to unethical actions (4%), pressure to quit job (4%) and threats to use physical force against them (4%).* The results of the study may justify the high level of anxiety in the officers surveyed. Thus, it may be one of the major risk factors for professional burnout in this professional group. Moreover, it is worth emphasizing that a high level of anxiety can lead to discouragement and a feeling of nonsense at work. Maslach and Leiter (2011, p. 47) indicate that: *"these feelings arise especially when employees lack control over their work and when the working environment is precarious and threatening […]. While it is commonly said that people work better in a competitive environment when they feel a little threatened, concerns about the future can distract them and make them work less carefully, with less enthusiasm and commitment."* These words seem to confirm the results obtained for the STAI self-assessment questionnaire.

The research also analyzed coping styles and coping strategies of prison officers. Heszen-Niejodek (2006) proposes to present the style of coping as a person's own and characteristic set of strategies or ways of coping, some of which are triggered in the process of dealing with a specific stress situation. The author assumes that the predominance of certain types of strategies results in a tendency to use them more often. Such a definition of the way of coping (style and strategy) was adopted in this paper.
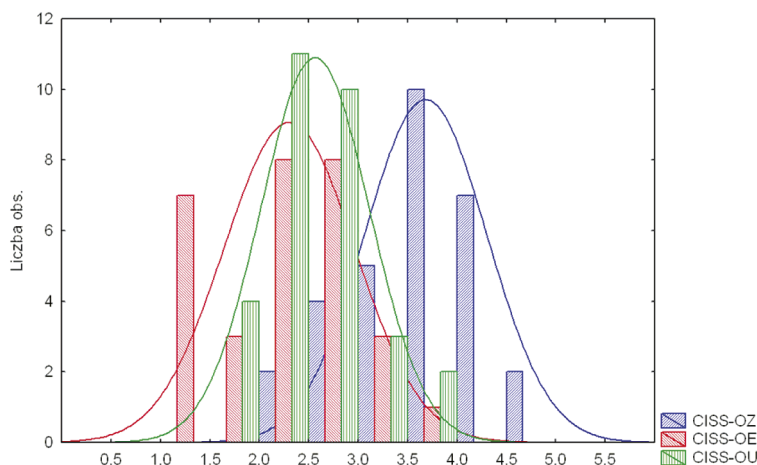
Table 4. Coping styles of respondents

Table 4 shows histograms of three coping styles – concentration on task (CISS-SSZ), concentration on avoidance (CISS-SSU) and concentration on emotions (CISS-SSE) – for the surveyed population of prison officers.

Table 4

As can be seen from the maximum positions of three Gaussian curves approximating normal distributions describing coping styles. The average for the use of task-based style was 3.66, for the strategy focused on avoiding 2.55, and for the style focused on emotions 2.29 (the values of all CISS variables may be in the range 1 ÷ 5). The results allow to conclude that the respondents, using the task-based coping styles quite commonly, use the avoid and emotion styles much less often. The result may be satisfactory, because despite the difficulties that work in the penitentiary system entails, the surveyed individuals take, as one may suppose, rational forms of coping, which means (taking into account coping styles) high predispositions for this work.

The results obtained were the starting point for determining which coping strategies are used by respondents in various specific stressful situations. The analysis of the results of the survey with the COPE questionnaire allowed to assume that the coping strategies most frequently used by the respondents included: active coping (COPE 1) – average 2.86 (max. 3.5); planning (COPE 2) – average 2.90 (max. 4.0); seeking instrumental support (COPE 3) – average 2.76 (max. 4.0); avoiding competitive actions (COPE 5) – average 2.58 (max. 3.75); seeking emotional support (COPE 4) – average 2.48 (max. 4.0). Thus, it can be concluded that the task orientation adopted by the respondents implies the application of remedial strategies for dealing with difficult situations. This optimistic conclusion is further confirmed by the correlation analysis between burnout and coping strategies used in the next research procedure. The statistically significant result

concerned only the positive relationship between depersonalization (DP) and the coping strategy based on refraining from action and waiting for the right moment (COPE 8), as illustrated in Chart 2.
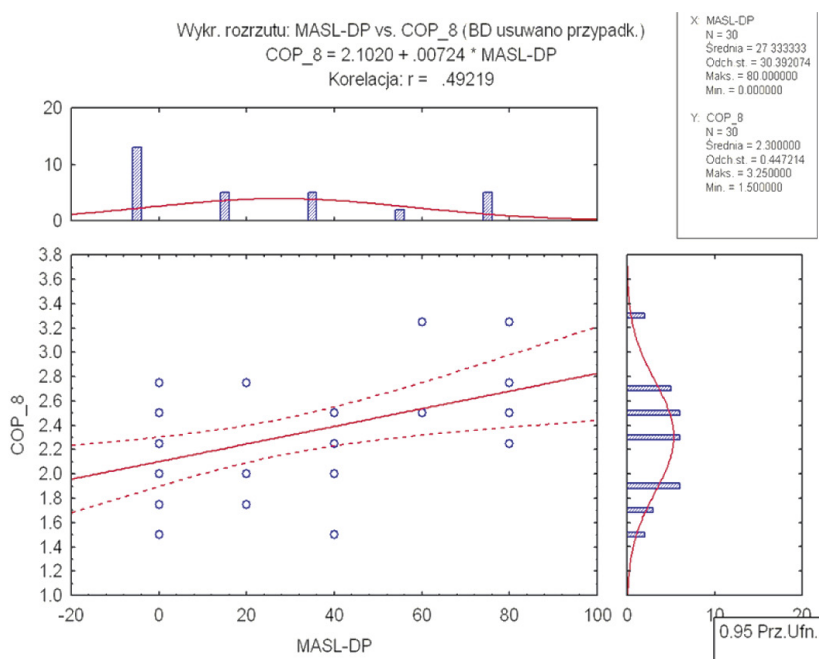

Chart 2. Correlation between depersonalization (DP) and COPE 8 coping strategy

To counteract failures, including professional burnout, the sense of self-efficacy is important. The conviction of one's own effectiveness is a stimulus to take action, change behaviors or choose a variant of behavior, and may be a factor that reduces symptoms of professional burnout (Gromulska, Piotrowicz, Cianciara, 2009, p. 428–429). As a result of the application of the General Self-Efficacy Scale – GSES (Table 5), it was found that the average GSES score for the sample covered by the study was 31.9, which corresponds to 7 on the sten scale. The self-efficacy of the surveyed officers is therefore slightly higher than the average, which, however, does not translate statistically significantly into resourcefulness towards the problem of professional burnout. It may be a consequence of inadequate assessment of one's own capabilities and belief in one's own professional competence.

The correlations between satisfaction with life (SWLS) and professional burnout are also not statistically significant (Table 5). Satisfaction with life is subjective, as it refers to the individual valuing of one's own resources or limitations encountered; it is a definition of overall satisfaction with life, but in relation to one's own situation, requirements and expectations. Despite the

individual assessment of satisfaction with life, it is not only individual factors that affect its development. Research carried out among people experiencing severe and incurable diseases indicated that *"the development of satisfaction with life is influenced, among others, by the social support received, especially the awareness of the environment's perception of the possibility of receiving help and the quality of relations with other people"* (Byra, 2011, p. 64–66). These factors can be successfully applied to the phenomenon of professional burnout, especially since satisfaction with life includes satisfaction with work. Lambert, Hogan and Barton (2002, p. 116–117) *defined satisfaction with work as "a subjective feeling on the individual level reflecting whether or not a person's needs are satisfied by a particular job".* For prison officers, satisfaction with work is important for the risk of burnout. In the Roy and Avdija survey (2012) of 480 prison officers in Indiana, satisfaction with work was a moderator of professional burnout in such a way that the higher the level of satisfaction, the lower the risk of burnout. It can be assumed that in the case of the studies presented in this article, the overall results, including the absence of statistically significant relationships between self-efficacy and satisfaction with life on one part and burnout on the other, were influenced by the small number of respondents.
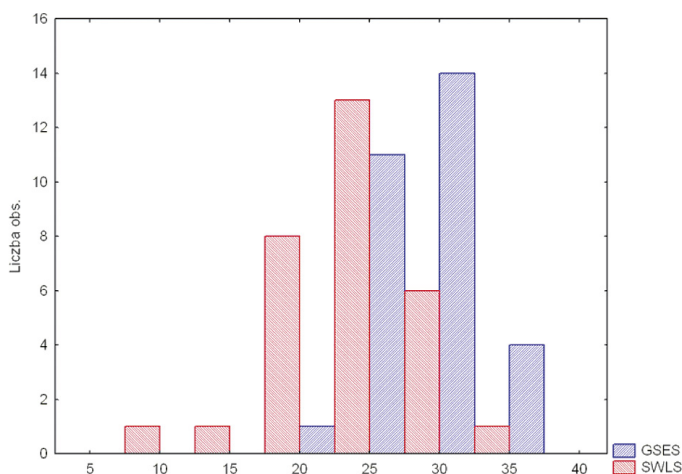

Table 5. Average values in the General Self-Efficacy Scale - GSES and in the Satisfaction With Life Scale - SWLS

Another analysis was carried out on the evaluation of social support received by the surveyed officers. The results obtained for both sub-scales, SSQSR1 – counting the number of people providing support and SSQSR2 – determining subjective satisfaction with the support received, were low. They amounted to an average of 1.58 (max = 6.00) for the declared number of people providing support, and 7.45 (max = 33) for satisfaction with the support received.

On the basis of the values of the correlation of the SSQSR variables with the burnout coefficients, it can be concluded that the social support in this research is not a significant factor determining the burnout level. It should be noted, however, that among the strategies declared by the surveyed officers there was the active search for social support in the form of advice, help and information as well as moral support, sympathy and understanding. This indicates a certain dissonance between the needs and the possibilities of receiving help. The results in this case are consistent with those of much larger populations around the world.

The results obtained by Cheeseman et al. (2011) in a research conducted on a group of 501 prison officers indicate that social support plays a significant role in preventing stress and burnout. Similar results were obtained by other researchers (de Magalhães Bezerra et al., 2016). As demonstrated by a meta-analysis of 40 Portuguese, English, French and Spanish language publications from 2000 to 2014 on risk factors and factors protecting prison staff in a stressful situation, carried out by de Magalhães Bezerra et al. (2016, p. 2142) *"social support received in prison (from colleagues and superiors) relieves the effects of tensions at work and has positive effects on health. This is an important protective factor, as demonstrated in studies on stress (including burnout). Good quality cooperation with superiors is analyzed as a protective factor against stress at work, just as low-quality relationships with superiors can increase this stress. Officers who positively perceive the support from superiors experience less stress and have much higher level of satisfaction. The support of colleagues is also appreciated as an effective factor in protecting against this health problems"*.

Interestingly, in the additional answers obtained in the SSQSR questionnaire the most common factors indicated by the respondents as motivating to work were support, but above all families (80%), only a few (4 people) considered the support from superiors as motivating factor. Another significant motivating factor is earnings (indicated by more than half of the respondents).

Summary and conclusions

The results of the studies presented above were of a pilot nature. They were conducted in a group of 30 prison officers. This, as can be expected, was a significant factor influencing their final result. The aim of the research was the preliminary diagnosis of the phenomenon of burnout in the group of officers in the so-called "first line", i.e. those most seriously exposed to stress and burnout. This aim has been achieved. The results presented in this study indicate the need for further exploration of the issue. Professional burnout, in this group of employees, is a fact, and the highest scores in the subscale – depersonalization, are worrying. Alarming is also the fact that the highest burnout scores in this

subscale concerned the youngest employees, with 2 to 5 years of service (cf. Lambert et al., 2015). A source of concern is the high indicator of anxiety, which may indicate a lack of proper competence and predisposition for the profession. This is somewhat at odds with the task-based style of living of the respondents and with their strategies of coping with stress. Especially active efforts to solve problems, planning how to deal with stress, avoiding other activities that are not related to the problem in order to deal with it more quickly, or finally, a positive re-evaluation in the form of a positive perception of their situation. Therefore, in further research, it is necessary to determine what individual resources and personal predispositions the prison officers have. It is worth comparing it with the research carried out by the Sygit-Kowalkowska team (2017) or other researchers of the issue (Lambert et al., 2002, 2010). Sociodemographic variables that can better explain the problem of burnout in this research group can then be more widely taken into account.

To sum up, the results obtained are a starting point for further research analyses, on a much larger population of officers. The ambiguity of the results and thus the difficulties in their interpretation are a challenge to be taken up and recognized more broadly in research.

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