KEYNOTE PAPER

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Original Scientific Paper

Psychosocial Climate in Croatian Prisons: Prison Officers' Perspective*

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The psychosocial climate in prison refers to the extent to which the whole institution is perceived safe for prisoners and prison officers and supportive of rehabilitation and behaviour change. It encompasses the institution's social, emotional, organisational, and physical determinants and is important for prisoners and prison officers. Moreover, tracking the psychosocial climate can be used to indicate changes and evaluate treatment programs. Compared to other countries, there is a lack of systematic research on the psychosocial climate in Croatian prisons, and the existing research focuses more on the prisoners than the prison officers' perspective. The perceived psychosocial climate in prison officers is, among others, related to attitudes about work tasks, interactions with co-workers and prisoners, job satisfaction, well-being, motivation and job performance, stress, and burnout. Thus, this paper aims to provide an overview of research on the psychosocial climate in Croatian from the prison officers' perspective. Furthermore, the findings from the project *Psychosocial climate in prisons – prisoners' and prison officers' perspective* conducted in 2017 in Croatian penal institutions (seven penitentiaries and 14 prisons), focusing on prison officers' perspective (N = 699), will be discussed. Finally, methodological and practical issues related to research on the psychosocial climate in Croatian prisons will be considered.

KEYWORDS: psychosocial climate / Croatia / prison officers' perspective

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Introduction

The psychosocial climate in prison refers to the extent to which the whole institution is perceived safe for prisoners and prison officers and supportive of rehabilitation and behaviour change (e.g., Liebling et al., 2011). It encompasses social, emotional, organisational, and physical determinants of the institution (Ross et al., 2008) and is important both for prisoners and prison officers. The concept of (psycho)social climate originates from Murray's (1938) hypothesis that social environments are significant determinants of behaviour and represent a set of characteristics that "(a) distinguish the organisation from other organisations, (b) are relatively enduring, and (c) affect the behaviour of people in the organisation" (Forehand & von Haller, 1964, p. 362). Ross et al. (2008, p. 447) define prison climate as the enduring "social, emotional, organisational and physical characteristics of a correctional institution as perceived by inmates and staff". Psychosocial climate is a relational social phenomenon (Lewis, 2017; Liebling et al., 2011; Mann et al., 2019), and the most important determinants of prison psychosocial climate are considered to be: staff-prisoner relationships (e.g., Liebling et al., 1999; Beijersbergen et al., 2016), inmate (peer-to-peer) relationships (e.g., van Ginneken & Palmen, 2022), and perceived safety (e.g., Auty & Liebling, 2020; Mann et al., 2019; Schalast et al., 2008).

Tracking of the psychosocial climate can be used to indicate changes and evaluate treatment programs (e.g., Barquín et al., 2019; Liebling, 2011). Compared to other countries, there seems to be a lack of systematic research on the psychosocial climate in Croatian prisons, and the existing research seems to focus more on the prisoners than the prison officers' perspective (e.g., Ajduković, 1990; Ajduković et al., 1992; Mejovšek et al., 2008). Thus, this paper aims to provide an overview of research on the psychosocial climate in Croatia from the prison officers' perspective.

Research on Psychosocial Climate from the Prison Officers' Perspective in Croatian Prisons[3]

Following Moos' work from 1970s and the Correctional Institutions Environment Scale (CIES; Wenk & Moos, 1972), Ajduković et al. (1990; as cited in Mejovšek et al., 2007) developed psychosocial climate scales named Skale psihosocijalne klime (PSK-B); however, it was criticised due to poor metric characteristics (Mejovšek et al., 2007). Further research from Ajduković et al.

[3] Although there are several qualifications work (i.e., master or doctoral thesis) and conference presentations related to psychosocial climate in Croatian prisons, we opted to focus here on published papers and projects we are aware of.

(1992) showed that Croatian prisoners consider the psychosocial climate less favourable than prison staff. In a comparative study of burnout among American and Croatian prison staff, Roy et al. (2010) showed that the American prison staff experienced more depersonalisation, while the Croatian prison staff more often perceived a lack of personal achievement at work and emotional exhaustion, compared to the American prison staff. Moreover, a study conducted by Kišak Gverić et al. (2015) indicated that compared to their colleagues from the hospitals, employees in helping professions in the prison system in Croatia are more dissatisfied with the nature and organisation of their work, which may be attributed to some objective characteristics of the prison system, such as stricter rules related to security, and the high-risk clients. Although these studies were conducted on a convenience sample of prison officers only from several penal institutions in Croatia, they indicate that prison officers experience high stress, workload, and exhaustion levels.

To assess the psychosocial climate in Croatian prisons more systematically, we conducted a project *Psychosocial climate in prisons – prisoners' and prison officers' perspectives* (Sučić, 2017) in all penal institutions in Croatia (7 penitentiaries and 14 prisons) and on a large sample of prison officers (N = 699; 53% male; 44% from security unit, 21% from treatment unit, 15% from the administrative unit). The psychosocial climate among prison officers was assessed with the Living Group Working Climate Inventory (Dekker et al., 2019). The results showed that, compared to prison officers from the Netherlands, prison officers in Croatia considered positive team functioning to be lower, negative team functioning higher, are less satisfied with their job, and consider the importance of work tasks lower. Analyses of the answers of employees of specific units showed that the prison officers from security units considered management to be poorer. They assessed their job satisfaction as lower than employees from the other units. However, they considered safety higher than other employees.

On the other hand, prison officers from treatment units assessed their job satisfaction as higher than those from security units and the importance of their working tasks as higher than those from other units. More than 40% of prison officers witnessed (auto)aggressive behaviour of prisoners, 43% were threatened, and 10% reported being victimised by prisoners (Sučić, 2017). Finally, the research indicated that negative emotions predominated in prison officers in Croatia (Sučić, 2021).

Methodological and Practical Issues of Psychosocial Climate Research in Croatian prisons

As the psychosocial climate strongly impacts prisoners and prison officers, it is essential to assess both perspectives. The perceived psychosocial climate in

prison officers is, among others, related to attitudes about work tasks, interactions with co-workers and prisoners, job satisfaction, well-being, motivation, job performance, stress, and burnout (van Ginneken et al., 2020). It would be interesting to investigate the relationship between levels of perceived stress and some characteristics of the organisation, such as number of employees, number of prisoners, hours of overtime, sick leaves, absenteeism, and type of penal institution. However, such analyses are challenging due to differences in sample sizes from specific institutions (i.e., penitentiaries vs prisons) and the possibility of jeopardising the anonymity of results. Moreover, due to indications that there is a certain resistance of prison officers towards psychological support within the institution (Wills et al., 2021), the awareness regarding such support system and reasons for (not) reaching for it should be examined. Such data, together with the data regarding the prison officers' perspective on psychosocial climate, could be used to create guidelines for prison programs and politics. Thus, it is essential to conduct research on psychosocial climate from both prisoner's and prison officers' perspectives systematically and regularly.

Overview of the Project *Psychosocial Climate and Individual Characteristics of Prisoners and Prison Officers in Penal Institutions in Croatia: A Multi-Method Approach* (PRISCLIM)

The Project's main goal is to investigate the psychosocial climate (assessed with Measuring Quality of Prisoner Life – MPQL and Staff Quality of Life – (SQL; Liebling et al., 2011) in penal institutions in Croatia, compare the psychosocial climate in the Croatian penal institutions to those from other countries, and contrast prisoners' and prison officers' perceptions of the psychosocial climate. Moreover, the Project aims to investigate the relative contribution of the perception of the psychosocial climate and individual characteristics of prisoners to their sentence serving, criminal career, and relationship with significant others. The Project is being conducted from January 1st, 2024, to December 31st, 2027. The research is planned to include a convenience sample of prisoners (targeted $N \approx 800$) and prison officers (targeted $N \approx 800$) in all penal institutions of the Republic of Croatia (7 penitentiaries and 14 prisons), the Diagnostic Centre and the Training Centre. The multi-method approach will be employed – self-assessment (survey), prisoners' assessment by treatment officers, and documentation analysis (during the first two years of the Project), as well as repeated data collection on prisoners' behaviour while serving their sentence (during the third and fourth year of the Project). This Project is expected to contribute to clarifying the relationship between prisoners' individual differences and the perception of the psychosocial climate and behaviour in an institutional context by employing a comprehensive analysis and a multi-method approach to data collection. Moreover, project results are expected to contribute

to further developing the criminogenic risk and need assessment tools. Finally, it is anticipated that results collected from prison officers related to their perception of the psychosocial climate, stress and coping, and the engagement with prisoners will contribute to the creation of guidelines for strengthening the capacity and empowerment of prison officers in their work and relationship with prisoners, as well as the creation of guidelines for prison programs and politics.

Conclusion

Conducting psychosocial climate research in prisons systematically from prisoners' and prison officers' perspectives is important for identifying problems, tracking changes, and creating guidelines for prison programs and politics. With the Project *Psychosocial Climate and Individual Characteristics of Prisoners and Prison Officers in Penal Institutions in Croatia: A Multi-Method Approach (PRISCLIM)*, which can be considered an extension of the Project *Psychosocial climate in prisons – prisoners' and prison officers' perspective* conducted seven years ago, we hope to establish a good practice of conducting systematic research of psychological climate in Croatian prisons.

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