

Competencies and Training of Prison Staff: Similarities and Differences Between Groups of Prison Workers in Slovenia*

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Introduction/Research Problem: Quality and comprehensive training of prison workers and the possession of appropriate competencies are crucial for maintaining a high level of professionalism in the prison environment. A study on the training and competencies of prison workers was carried out in 2022 in all Slovenian prisons and a correctional home. *Objectives:* The aim of the study was to identify specific competencies and training needed by an individual group of prison workers in Slovenia. *Methods:* The survey, using a hardcopy questionnaire, was administered in June 2022. Based on a sample of 309 prison workers, similarities and differences in the self-assessments of different groups of prison workers (prison officers, treatment workers, work instructors and managers) on the quality of training, their own competence to work in the prison system and the need for additional training were analysed. *Results:* The results of the statistical analyses showed that all groups of prison workers believe they possess the key knowledge and skills to perform the specific work tasks that are required of them according to their position in prison. At the same time, prison workers highlighted the need for additional training, especially regarding the knowledge of stress management techniques. *Conclusion:* The findings of the study highlighted the importance of specific training for each group of prison workers. In addition, the implications of findings for Slovenian penological practice are discussed in light of the current challenges faced by the prison administration.

KEYWORDS: competencies / training / prison workers / Slovenia

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Introduction

Work in prisons is demanding and highly specialised, requiring specific knowledge, skills, methods, techniques, and approaches for working with prisoners. Working in a stressful and dangerous prison environment with hostile clients requires selected staff that possess appropriate competencies. Brinc (1997) wrote that more care should be given to the selection and training of prison workers. For example, the (un)suitability of certain individuals (e.g., ex-soldiers) to work in prison is highlighted in the recommendations of international organisations, such as the Council of Europe Recommendation (97)12 on workers in penal institutions (Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, 1997), which are not always taken into account in practice due to the lack of [appropriate] candidates. Consequently, prison organisations must organise quality training and education that give (future) prison workers practical knowledge, skills and relevant competencies for working with prisoners.

The work performance of prison workers depends on the availability of appropriate training and organisation that allows for the integration of new techniques to improve work quality (Castle & Martin, 2006; Lugo, 2016), as prisons are inherently conservative institutions where changes are commonly undesirable. The training of prison workers has a positive effect on the understanding of prisoners and their behaviour, which is expressed in the quality of prison staff-prisoners relationships and prison workers' greater support for the resocialisation of prisoners (Beijersbergen et al., 2015; Burton et al., 1991; Lambert et al., 2009). The quality of training is essential to support the treatment of prisoners, as studies (e.g., Crouch & Alpert, 1982; Jurik et al., 1987) have not found any connection between the achieved education and prison workers' support for the resocialisation of prisoners. The latter highlights the importance of appropriate and quality training for prison workers in relevant fields, mainly within the prison organisation.

In addition to knowledge, skills and abilities acquired by formal education and training within the prison system, an individual's personality characteristics (values, motivation, self-image, emotions, thinking patterns, etc.) influence the competence of prison workers. Brinc (2001) pointed out that personality characteristics have a greater influence on the willingness or ability of prison workers to help prisoners than professional competence. An individual's role in prison, internalisation of norms of professional culture, and the perception of one's own position in wider society have a significant impact on prison workers' personalities (Garrihy, 2021). In addition, prison workers' personal characteristics, expressed in their competencies, affect their work and relations with prisoners.

Objectives

The study focuses on the training and professional competencies of prison workers in Slovenia, aiming to identify similarities and differences between different groups of prison workers. First, legal provisions for training prison staff in Slovenia are presented, followed by a delineation of the training courses for various groups of prison workers (prison officers, treatment workers, work instructors, and managerial staff). Key and specific competencies that Slovenian prison workers should possess are also described. Second, the findings of the empirical study on professional competencies and training of prison workers in Slovenia are presented. Specifically, the results of statistical analysis on different groups of prison workers' self-assessment of their own competence and the quality of training, as well as the need for additional training, are presented and interpreted. In conclusion, the importance of findings for penal practice and further development of prison workers' training in Slovenia is discussed.

Training and Competencies of Prison Workers in Slovenia

Prison Workers' Training

Quality and comprehensive training of prison workers is crucial for maintaining a high level of professionalism in the prison environment. The Enforcement of Criminal Sanctions Act (2006) is the primary legal document in Slovenia that regulates the training of prison staff following guidelines and recommendations of the United Nations and Council of Europe. While the Act in articles 231.-233.a precisely defines the form of training for prison officers, the training for treatment workers is described in more general terms in article 244, which foresees the organisation of training for a specific field and work methods (without precise provisions). The generality in legal provisions for the training of treatment workers is a result of the basic requirements for filling the position of a treatment worker in the Slovenian prison system, which requires higher education (a minimum vocational college) in sociology, social work, psychology, criminal justice etc. Work in prison is complex (Rules on the Implementation of Prison Sentences, 2019) and requires highly qualified workers. This need has been recognised by the Slovenian Prison Administration, which committed to the development of prison workers' training in the Strategy of the Prison Administration of the Republic of Slovenia (2017–2020) (2017).

Prison officers represent the largest group of employees in the Slovenian prison system, for whom comprehensive basic training comprises three program sections. This type of training aims to acquire versatile and interdisciplinary knowledge that enables professional work in prisons and a correctional home based on respect for the human rights and dignity of prisoners. The entire training

lasts nine months, which the prison officer must complete within 18 months of employment. The training covers the following areas: (1) enforcement of prison sentences, (2) international frameworks for the enforcement of prison sentences, (3) fundamental human rights, (4) techniques, skills and methods for working with prisoners, (5) criminality and social context, (6) fundamental values of the prison officer profession, and 7) techniques of managing prisoners (Prison Administration of the Republic of Slovenia, 2023). In the first part of the training program, which lasts one month, candidates for prison officers get acquainted with the system of enforcement of criminal sanctions and activities of the Slovenian Prison Administration. The second part, which lasts five months, includes acquiring basic theoretical and practical skills for performing tasks in prison. In the last, third program block, which lasts three months, candidates for prison officers consolidate the acquired theoretical knowledge in practice (mandatory practical work in prisons and a correctional home) under the supervision of the commander and learn about work in other Slovenian prisons – candidates for prison officers are rotated within the prison system. After completing basic training and a professional exam, prison officers take an oath before the Director General of the Slovenian Prison Administration. Prison officers who have a desire/need to acquire additional special skills or occupy management positions are offered a variety of further training courses (e.g., space invasion, shooting instructor, conflict management, training of heads of security departments, etc.) (Prison Administration of the Republic of Slovenia, 2023).

Despite the high work demands of treatment workers who are responsible for the implementation of treatment programs, the doctrinal development of prison work, the coordination of more demanding projects, management of prison statistics, etc. (Prevolšek et al., 2018), comprehensive basic training is not organised for them. It is assumed that treatment workers have acquired appropriate knowledge and competencies in sociology, social work, pedagogy, andragogy, psychology, theology, law, etc., for working with prisoners during their formal education at universities and colleges. Besides the appropriate education, treatment workers must pass the exam from provisions of the General Administrative Procedure Act (2006), which can also be taken after starting employment within the prescribed period. The systematisation of jobs requires psychologists and social workers to have appropriate education in psychology and social work, while there are no specific provisions for pedagogues. However, in practice, most of the latter have completed studies in social sciences. From a broader theoretical perspective, it can be argued that work instructors can be classified as treatment workers, as learning new work skills is an essential element of the resocialisation of prisoners. Work instructors are required to have an appropriate professional education (completed high school programs focusing on metal or wood processing), but some work instructors (mainly in the correctional home) also have obtained an additional pedagogical-andragogic qualification, as they believe that in contrast to work instructors in prisons, juveniles in a

correctional home are not only taught new skills but also raised (Meško & Hacin, 2023). Once a year, or when a sufficient number of newly hired treatment workers is reached, internal training is organised that includes the following areas: (1) professional treatment and employment of prisoners, (2) treatment of addiction and violence, (3) international and national legislation of enforcement of criminal sanctions, (4) work of educators, social workers and prison officers, and (5) specific treatments of prisoners (recognition of suicidality, personality disorders, sexual preference disorders, etc.). The induction of new treatment workers in prisons and a correctional home is implemented informally, as the formal mentoring program is not in place (Prison Administration of the Republic of Slovenia, 2023). More than 25 different additional training courses are available to treatment workers for further specialisation, including various forms of supervision, public speaking, leadership with social power, foreign languages, conflict resolution, etc. (Ministry of Justice, Prison Administration of the Republic of Slovenia, 2022; Prison Administration of the Republic of Slovenia, 2023).

Professionalism and high qualification of managerial staff are vital, as they influence the social climate and humanisation of relations between prison actors, as well as the pursuit of aims of punishment in prisons (Brinc, 2011; Schalast et al., 2008). The managerial staff comprises employees of the General Directorate of Slovenian Prison Administration, directors of prisons, and heads of departments. These employees represent highly educated individuals with many years of experience working as prison officers and/or treatment workers in the prison system. Internal promotion, which prevents recruiting external “staff” without adequate knowledge and expertise to higher positions, maintains a high level of professionalism in the prison system. The latter can be seen as a safeguard, as managerial staff lack specific training. Prison workers (prison officers and treatment workers) who have achieved the appropriate level of formal education and have the desire to occupy management positions are offered a number of additional training focusing on leadership, administration, and management of prisons (Prison Administration of the Republic of Slovenia, 2023).

Competencies of Prison Workers in Slovenia

Due to the specific treatment-oriented practice in Slovenian prisons, Hacin et al. (2022) highlighted key and specific competencies of individual groups of prison workers. They considered: (1) organization affiliation and work ethics, (2) respect for authority and the ability to function in a hierarchical system, (3) objective treatment of all prisoners based on respect for human rights, (4) support for the resocialization of prisoners and cooperation with colleagues from other departments in the prison, (5) principled behaviour at work and in private life (presenting an example to prisoners), (6) self-confidence and self-control including managing stress, (7) innovation, responsibility and reliability in

performing of daily tasks and communication skills, and (8) knowledge of legislation.

In addition, individual groups of prison workers should possess specific competencies that would enable them to effectively conduct the work tasks required of them. Prison officers as the largest group of prison workers should: (1) identify with the group (“collegiality”) and be conscientiousness and assist colleagues, (2) exercise authority and ability to command and pay attention to detail, (3) show tolerance towards prisoners and their daily demands, threats, manipulations, etc., and be willing to establish quality (sometimes informal) relations with prisoners, (4) be open to treatment ideas and control aggression and exercising restraint in the use of force (set “boundaries” in the use of discretion and non-violent conflict resolution), (5) be physical fit and possess the ability to work routine and shift work, (6) know how to multitask, make quick decisions and perform tasks that do not fall directly into one's field of work, and (7) have “street” knowledge to recognize manipulation in daily interactions with prisoners (Hacin et al., 2022; Meško et al., 2022).

Treatment workers have a demanding mission of resocialising prisoners for the implementation of which the following set of specific competencies are required: (1) in-depth knowledge of pedagogy, andragogy, psychology, penology, social work, etc., that enables understanding of prisoners' problems and offering appropriate help, (2) the ability to keep an emotional distance from prisoners and objective evaluation of prisoner's progress, (3) willingness to acquire new skills and find innovative solutions for prisoners' problems, (4) to give the impression of a trustworthy person and show empathy, kindness, determination and patience when working with prisoners, (5) active listening of prisoners, ability to recognise lying and manipulation, and willingness to reduce expectations regarding the resocialisation of prisoners to ensure safety in prison, (6) limited performance expectations at work (Hacin et al., 2022; Meško et al., 2022).

Managerial staff, in order to provide effective leadership and strategic planning, should be able to: (1) identify suitable qualities for appointing employees to managerial positions and assigning more demanding tasks to reliable prison workers, (2) understand the “wider” picture of the enforcement of criminal sanctions with an emphasis on the resocialization of prisoners, (3) provide fair and equal treatment of all employees, and constructively solve prison workers' problems, (4) implement changes in the prison system and cooperate with external organisation, (5) personally interact with prisoners, and (6) assign work tasks in the form of a conversation rather than a command. In addition, they should be self-initiative, charismatic, professional, and meticulous, and possess organizational skills and knowledge of legislation that would present them as a role model to other prison workers (Hacin et al., 2022; Meško et al., 2022).

The key competencies that all Slovenian prison workers should possess are similar to competencies expected/required from prison staff in other countries. Affiliation with the organisation (prison system) is formed as a fundamental characteristic of the personality of prison workers during training and is expressed in work ethics, moral behaviour, responsibility and reliability at work, self-control and self-confidence (Garrihy, 2021), presents one of the essential key competencies of prison workers. The relationship between prison workers and the prison organisation is mutual, as employees influence the operation of the prison. The prison environment affects the well-being of the prison workers (Lambert et al., 2021), or as Bennet wrote (in Rosenberg, 1951, p. 42), each institution is the extended shadow of a handful of individuals. Despite the presence of treatment orientation in the Slovenian prison system, the nature of prison work and the characteristics of prisoners (e.g., hostility, violence, manipulation) demands the presence of authority in the prison environment. Prison workers are required to respect the authority of superiors and operate in a hierarchical system (Morgan & Smith, 2009). In general, prison workers support different ideologies of punishment (resocialisation, retribution, incapacitation, special deterrence and general prevention; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2008).

Consequently, support for resocialisation of prisoners can be seen as the most specific key competency of Slovenian prison workers compared to those in other countries. The support for treatment ideology is reflected in the objective treatment of all prisoners with respect for human rights and striving for their resocialisation, inevitably leading to cooperation between various services within the prison system. In other words, it is a comprehensive approach to treating prisoners that requires collaboration between prison officers and the treatment service (Hacin et al., 2022; Meško et al., 2022).

Despite the differences in possessed/required competencies of prison workers, all pursue the following key goals: (1) successful implementation of the treatment programs, (2) well-being of all employees, and (3) a high level of professionalism of all prison workers. Prison officers have traditionally been structurally embroiled in a conflict of roles – providing safety and security and resocialising prisoners (Thomas, 1972). As bearers of authority and individuals responsible for ensuring safety and security in prisons (Meško et al., 2004), they are required to be physically fit, conscientious, and help fellow prison officers (the presence of collegiality within the group and also subcultural norms; Weinrath, 2016), as well as the ability to perform routine work characteristic of authoritarian organisations. In the Slovenian resocialisation-oriented prison system, the use of force is rare and “undesirable”. It is used gradually and only in exceptional cases.

Consequently, prison officers have to exercise restraint. Hacin and Meško (2024) pointed out that the position of prison officers in modern prisons requires them to relinquish their traditional [coercive] power over prisoners and cooperate with treatment workers in the resocialisation of prisoners. It is expected from

prison officers that in addition to classic approaches of maintaining order and safety and safety, they would also (1) possess “street knowledge” to recognise prisoners’ manipulations, (2) use humour to prevent escalation of tense situations, and (3) strive to establish quality and sometimes even informal relations with prisoners (Liebling et al., 2011).

Härenstam (1989) argued that the introduction of new aims of punishment in the 20th century transformed prisons significantly. In addition to incapacitating criminals, prisons were given the “task” of their resocialisation, which led to the diversification of prison staff and increased the complexity of their work. New categories of prison workers have appeared, such as work instructors, social workers, pedagogues, psychologists, etc., which can be categorised as treatment workers. The specificity of the Slovenian prison system, which emphasises the resocialisation of prisoners, can be seen in the employment of a greater number of treatment workers compared to other countries (their share in Slovenia is above the European average; Aebi et al., 2023). Treatment workers must possess appropriate competencies that enable them to implement treatment programs with demanding individuals, that is, carrying out counselling and guidance as well as understanding prisoners’ problems. Appropriate competencies (e.g., high frustration tolerance, emotional distance to incarcerated persons) also help them to endure stress, as in the course of their work, treatment workers are often faced with: (1) lack of success (high recidivist rate), (2) ingratitude or even open hostility of prisoners, and (3) great responsibility, as they have the power to significantly influence the quality of prisoners’ life during imprisonment (i.e. deciding on benefits and sanctions). (Marshall, 2005; Prevolšek et al., 2018). In general, treatment workers are the main supporters of the resocialisation of prisoners, which means that they must have a sense of mission or calling, which they also transfer to other groups of prison workers (Gordon, 1999; Kifer et al., 2003).

Managerial staff presents the bridge between [theoretical framework of] penal policy (primarily the aims of punishment) and their implementation in practice. Goldberg (2019) pointed out that the managerial staff’s tasks differ according to organisational goals and institutional structure and practice, which includes management, employee evaluation, vision, goals, performance evaluation, etc. In addition to appropriate leadership competencies and charisma, they must set an example for prison workers and be experts in general management, event organisation, public administration and prison management (Bryans, 2000). Most of the managerial staff’s competencies are universal. Still, the specificity of the Slovenian prison system is visible in their daily contact with prison workers and prisoners, as well as partly decentralised management that is a consequence of the organisation of the prison system itself, which is based on small institutions. For example, only one prison in Slovenia can be considered a large prison with a capacity for 468 prisoners; however, by European/world standards, it would be

categorised as a small or medium-sized prison (Uprava Rpeublike Slovenije za izvrševanje kazenskih sankcij, n.d.). Decentralisation of management, a less hierarchical structure and good relations between managerial staff and other prison workers are the basis of a dynamic prison organisation, where communication occurs smoothly between different levels and departments (Coyle, 2007; Johnsen et al., 2011). In such a system, managerial staff does not represent some distant authority but individuals who instil confidence in prison workers that the welfare of the employees is their primary task. Coyle (2007, p. 496) wrote that the prisons with the most humane atmosphere and positive culture are those with the most visible leadership.

Methods

Research Procedure and Sample

The study on professional competencies and training of prison workers was conducted in 2022 in the entire Slovenian prison system. Prior to actual field work, the research plan and the questionnaire were forwarded to the General Directorate of the Slovenian Prison Administration, which gave its consent to conduct the study. The survey of prison staff took place in June 2022 in all six Slovenian prisons with departments and the correctional home (14 locations). All prison workers were invited to participate in the study, and 322 have decided to do so (response rate of 35.2%; Ministry of Justice, Prison Administration of the Republic of Slovenia, 2022). Before conducting the survey, the study was presented to prison workers, after which hard copies of the questionnaire were distributed to individuals who decided to participate; the “paper and pencil” method was used. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. The surveying of prison staff took place in three forms: (1) simultaneous surveying of a large number of prison workers who gathered in common areas, (2) surveying individual prison workers in their offices or workstations, and (3) distributing questionnaires to individuals, together with an envelope, in which they put completed questionnaire, sealed it and left it at a pre-arranged place, where it was collected. The latter method was used rarely (less than 10% of all respondents), but was necessary in some cases, due to the work obligations of prison workers that prevented their participation in the study during the researcher’s visit.

Initially, the sample consisted of 322 prison workers, however, 13 respondents were excluded due to the inability to classify them into the four established groups of prison workers: prison officers, treatment workers, work instructors and managerial staff (directors of prisons, heads of departments and heads of specific sectors within institutions). In Table 1, the characteristics of the sample by groups of prison workers are presented. Prison officers (63.1%) represented more than half of all prison workers surveyed, followed by treatment workers (18.4%),

managerial staff (10.1%), and work instructors (8.4%). Men predominated in the groups of work instructors (96%), prison officers (84%) and managerial staff (61%), while women dominated the treatment workers group (75%). High school education prevailed among prison officers and work instructors, while all treatment workers and managerial staff achieved a higher level of education; the rules of the Slovenian Prison Administration demand that all treatment workers and managerial staff have completed at least a vocational college level. All groups of prison workers pointed out that they primarily work with prisoners, which was expected due to the prison population structure in Slovenia in 2022, where prisoners represented the largest group of incarcerated persons. Besides treatment workers, who mostly saw the resocialisation of prisoners as their primary task, a significant proportion of work instructors (40%) and managerial staff (20%) saw the resocialisation of prisoners as their mission, which indicates the presence of a treatment orientation not only in primary providers and implementers of treatment programs (i.e. treatment workers) but also in the field of prison work (as a form of activity that contributes to the resocialisation of an individual) and at the organisational level (leadership that supports the resocialisation of prisoners). The average age (with standard deviations [*SD*]) of prison officers was 43.80 years (*SD* = 8.33), treatment workers 41.30 (*SD* = 7.98), work instructors 47.73 (*SD* = 8.48) and managerial staff 46.89 years (*SD* = 6.93). The number and structure of prison workers in each institution or department reflect the structure of all employees by the institution at the time of the survey (Ministry of Justice, Prison Administration of the Republic of Slovenia, 2022).

Instrument and Data Analysis

The study on professional competencies and training of prison workers was conducted in 2022 in the entire Slovenian prison system. The questionnaire used was designed based on the modified questionnaires on the professional competencies of prison officers (Meško et al., 2004) and the training and competence of treatment workers (Prevolšek et al., 2018). The questionnaire included questions related to the prison workers' assessment of the quality of training (9 questions) and their own competence (19 questions), the need for additional training (16 questions), and the socio-demographic data of respondents (6 questions). All parts of the questionnaire were pre-tested (Meško et al., 2004; Prevolšek et al., 2018).

The responses of surveyed prison workers responses were entered into an SPSS database and analysed. All the observed variables were normally distributed (graphically tested using histograms, P-P plots and Q-Q plots). Descriptive statistics and One-way MANOVA analyses were performed.

Table 1*Sample Characteristics*

		Prison officers <i>n</i> = 195	Treatment workers <i>n</i> = 57	Work instructors <i>n</i> = 26	Managerial staff <i>n</i> = 31
Gender	Male	163 (84)	14 (25)	25 (96)	19 (61)
	Female	32 (16)	43 (75)	1 (4)	12 (39)
Education	High school	117 (60)	0 (0)	18 (70)	0 (0)
	Vocational college	27 (14)	2 (3)	4 (15)	3 (10)
	Bachelor degree	46 (23)	45 (79)	4 (15)	26 (87)
	Master's degree and/or Ph.D.	5 (3)	10 (18)	0 (0)	1 (3)
I mostly work with...	Prisoners	65 (33)	26 (46)	15 (58)	14 (45)
	Juveniles	8 (4)	5 (9)	0 (0)	2 (7)
	Remand prisoners	32 (17)	2 (4)	1 (4)	1 (3)
	Different types of imprisoned persons	90 (46)	23 (41)	10 (38)	14 (45)
Prison/department	Dob	51 (26)	17 (30)	8 (31)	8 (26)
	Slovenska vas	2 (1)	2 (4)	3 (12)	1 (3)
	Puščava	1 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
	Ig (women)	15 (8)	5 (9)	1 (4)	2 (6)
	Celje	13 (7)	9 (16)	3 (12)	5 (16)
	Ljubljana	33 (17)	5 (9)	0 (0)	1 (3)
	Novo mesto	6 (3)	2 (4)	1 (4)	1 (3)
	Ig	2 (1)	2 (4)	0 (0)	1 (3)
	Maribor	24 (12)	4 (7)	3 (12)	5 (16)
	Murska Sobota	14 (7)	0 (0)	1 (4)	1 (3)
	Rogoza	4 (2)	0 (0)	1 (4)	1 (3)
	Koper	11 (6)	5 (9)	5 (19)	2 (6)
	Nova Gorica	11 (6)	1 (2)	0 (0)	1 (3)
	Radeče	8 (4)	5 (9)	0 (0)	2 (6)
The main work task in prison	Administration	5 (3)	1 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)
	Working with prisoners	14 (8)	4 (7)	4 (16)	2 (7)
	Resocialisation	8 (5)	46 (83)	10 (40)	6 (20)
	Safety and security	123 (70)	1 (2)	0 (0)	2 (7)
	Management	12 (7)	1 (2)	2 (8)	16 (53)

Note: Data are given in *n* (%) format.

Results

Statistical analyses of prison workers' responses showed that all groups (prison officers, treatment workers, work instructors and managerial staff) believe that they have adequate education for working in prison (ranging from 85% for prison officers to 100% for work instructors), but not all groups demonstrate sufficient competence (ranging from 32% of managerial staff to 85% for prison officers). An interesting paradox emerges, as the adequacy of achieved education is not as crucial for prison officers as it is for other groups, as comprehensive training is available for them before starting their job or during the trainee period, which is also reflected in their assessment of their own qualifications for the job. The comprehensive basic training for prison officers provides them with all the theoretical and [even more important] practical knowledge to carry out the daily tasks in prisons assigned to them, including how to establish proper relations with prisoners, while other groups receive no such training. The situation is the opposite for work instructors and treatment workers, and partly for managerial staff, as achieved [appropriate], education is crucial, as there is no comprehensive basic training available for them that would prepare them for work with prisoners and/or management of the institution. For example, treatment workers obtain theoretical knowledge of psychology, andragogy, social work, etc. that are crucial for prisoners' rehabilitation during their studies at the universities but lack practical knowledge of prison work, as there are no specialised university programs in Slovenia that would prepare them for working with prisoners. Similarly, work instructors possess theoretical knowledge and practical skills in metal working or carpentry, which have obtained during schooling but lack people skills that would enable them to more efficiently work with prisoners. Over half of prison workers in each group (ranging from 58% for prison officers to 65% for managerial staff) were satisfied with the quality of on-the-job training. We must point out the difference in the scope of training, which depends on the responsibilities and work tasks of each group (e.g. work instructors need less training to perform their work, as they have acquired most of the basic skills during schooling while performing the duties of a prison officer requires specific knowledge, which the individual cannot obtain through schooling outside the prison system). The majority of prison workers from all groups (ranging from 81% for managerial staff to 92% for work instructors) expressed satisfaction with the content of the training and also participated in additional training (76% of prison officers, 88% of treatment workers, 92% of work instructors, and 97% of managerial staff). Most of the employees (ranging from 81% for managerial staff to 96% for treatment workers and work instructors) were satisfied with the work tasks, but at the same time, they pointed out that they performed many additional tasks (43% of prison officers, 71% of treatment workers, 58% of work instructors, and 65% of managerial staff). In particular, treatment workers and managerial staff highlighted that they perform many tasks intending to help the organisation

(e.g., additional help to prisoners in the form of clothing and basic necessities, carrying out essential maintenance work in prisons, etc.), which indicates a sense of duty/belonging to the prison system. The need for additional training was present in all groups of prison workers (ranging from 37% for prison officers to 61% for treatment workers), but treatment workers expressed the greatest desire for additional knowledge. As case-bearers and persons responsible for the resocialisation of prisoners, there is [always] a need for additional knowledge (i.e. the latest discoveries in the field of resocialisation, addiction treatment, treatment of violence, etc.). In contrast to treatment workers, prison officers expressed a lesser interest in additional training since their primary task in prisons is to ensure safety and security, for which they are sufficiently trained. In Table 2, answers of the respondents by groups of prison workers are presented.

Table 2

Prison Workers' Assessment of the Quality of Training and Own Competencies

		Prison officers	Treatment workers	Work instructors	Managerial staff
Education adequacy for work in prison	Yes	161 (85)	56 (98)	25 (100)	30 (97)
	No	28 (15)	1 (2)	0 (0)	1 (3)
Qualifications for the position you hold	Yes	170 (88)	30 (53)	9 (35)	10 (32)
	No	24 (12)	27 (47)	17 (65)	21 (68)
Satisfaction with the quality of job training	Yes	110 (58)	35 (64)	13 (57)	20 (65)
	No	80 (42)	20 (36)	10 (43)	11 (35)
Additional training	Yes	149 (76)	50 (88)	24 (92)	30 (97)
	No	46 (24)	7 (12)	2 (8)	1 (3)
Satisfaction with the training content ^a	Dissatisfied	25 (13)	7 (18)	1 (8)	4 (19)
	Satisfied	164 (87)	32 (82)	12 (92)	17 (81)
	<i>M (SD)</i>	2.98 (0.56)	2.82 (0.51)	2.85 (0.56)	2.86 (0.79)
Work satisfaction ^a	Dissatisfied	18 (9)	2 (4)	1 (4)	5 (16)
	Satisfied	175 (91)	54 (96)	25 (96)	26 (84)
	<i>M (SD)</i>	3.02 (0.55)	3.18 (0.51)	3.00 (0.71)	3.10 (0.61)
Additional tasks not required by the position	Yes	82 (43)	40 (71)	14 (58)	20 (65)
	No	109 (57)	16 (29)	10 (42)	11 (35)
The need for additional skills due to new challenges	Yes	66 (37)	30 (61)	9 (45)	16 (42)
	No	113 (63)	19 (39)	11 (55)	12 (58)

Note: Values are *n* (%) or as otherwise indicated.

^a Scale: from 1 – I was not satisfied at all to 4 – I was completely satisfied. Categories “dissatisfied” (values 1 and 2) and “satisfied” (values 3 and 4) were formed.

In Table 3, the One-Way MANOVA model was employed to assess the differences in prison staff's self-assessment of work competencies between different groups of prison workers. Results (Wilks' lambda = .41; $p < .001$) confirmed the assumptions on the dependence of self-assessment of work competencies on work position, as statistically significant differences between

prison workers' self-assessment of their knowledge of: (1) self-defence, (2) communication, (3) andragogy, (4) pedagogy, (5) criminology, (6) criminalistics, (7) psychology, (8) penology, (9) treatment of addiction, (10) administrative procedures, (11) criminal law, (12) procedural rules and other legal documents, and (13) first aid, among observed groups were identified. Bonferroni post hoc test results revealed that statistically significant differences exist between: (1) prison officers and treatment workers ($p < .001$), and police officers and managerial staff ($p < .05$) in their knowledge of self-defence, (2) prison officers and treatment workers ($p < .001$) in their knowledge of first aid, (3) prison officers and treatment workers ($p < .05$), treatment workers and work instructors ($p < .01$), and treatment workers and managerial staff ($p < .05$) in their communicational skills, (4) prison officers and treatment workers ($p < .001$) and treatment workers and work instructors ($p < .001$) in their knowledge of andragogy, (5) prison officers and treatment workers ($p < .001$), treatment workers and work instructors ($p < .001$), and treatment workers and managerial staff ($p < .01$) in their knowledge of pedagogy, (6) prison officers and work instructors ($p < .001$), treatment workers and work instructors ($p < .05$), treatment workers and managerial staff ($p < .05$), and work instructors and managerial staff ($p < .001$) in their knowledge of criminology, (7) prison officers and treatment workers ($p < .01$), prison officers and work instructors ($p < .001$), treatment workers and managerial staff ($p < .05$), and work instructors and managerial staff ($p < .001$) in their knowledge of criminalistics, (8) prison officers and treatment workers ($p < .01$), prison officers and work instructors ($p < .05$) in their knowledge of psychology, (9) prison officers and work instructors ($p < .001$), treatment workers and work instructors ($p < .01$), and work instructors and managerial staff ($p < .001$) in their knowledge of penology, (10) prison officers and treatment workers ($p < .05$), treatment workers and work instructors ($p < .01$) in their skills to deal with addicts, (11) treatment workers and work instructors ($p < .01$) and work instructors and managerial staff ($p < .001$) in their knowledge of administrative procedures, (12) prison officers and work instructors ($p < .01$) and work instructors and managerial staff ($p < .01$) in their knowledge of criminal law, (13) prison officers and work instructors ($p < .001$), treatment workers and work instructors ($p < .001$), and work instructors and managerial staff ($p < .001$) in their knowledge of procedural rules and other legal documents, and (14) treatment workers and work instructions ($p < .05$) in their stress management.

A comparison of prison officers, treatment workers, work instructors and managerial staff showed that prison officers perceive their own competence in the areas of self-defence and first aid more positively than other groups of prison workers. In contrast, treatment workers had a more positive perception of their own competencies in communication skills, andragogy, pedagogy, psychology, treatment of addicts, and stress management techniques (Table 3).

Table 3

One-Way MANOVA Model: Prison Workers' Self-assessment of Work Competencies

Variables	Prison officers (<i>n</i> = 189)	Treatment workers (<i>n</i> = 57)	Work instructors (<i>n</i> = 21)	Managerial staff (<i>n</i> = 31)	<i>F</i>
I am in sufficient physical fitness.	3.84 (0.98)	4.00 (0.91)	4.05 (0.97)	4.03 (0.71)	0.88
I have sufficient knowledge of self-defence.	3.21 (1.12)	2.21 (1.11)	2.81 (1.25)	2.55 (1.23)	12.59***
I have sufficient knowledge of foreign languages.	3.14 (1.08)	3.09 (1.01)	3.10 (1.18)	2.74 (1.09)	1.24
I have sufficient communication skills.	3.93 (0.79)	4.26 (0.64)	3.52 (0.68)	3.81 (0.87)	5.78***
I have sufficient knowledge of andragogy.	2.95 (0.95)	3.68 (0.95)	2.67 (0.86)	3.35 (0.99)	11.08***
I have sufficient knowledge of pedagogy.	2.90 (0.99)	3.95 (0.93)	2.76 (0.94)	3.19 (1.14)	17.24***
I have sufficient knowledge of peaceful conflict resolution.	3.79 (0.77)	3.98 (0.67)	3.48 (0.60)	3.81 (0.87)	2.41
I have sufficient computer skills.	3.46 (1.03)	3.60 (0.90)	3.05 (1.12)	3.26 (0.86)	1.93
I have sufficient knowledge of criminology.	3.03 (1.04)	2.67 (0.93)	1.95 (0.92)	3.35 (1.14)	9.98***
I have sufficient knowledge of criminalistics.	2.95 (1.06)	2.44 (0.96)	1.95 (0.92)	3.13 (1.15)	9.24***
I have sufficient knowledge of psychology.	2.98 (0.98)	3.47 (0.89)	2.38 (0.67)	2.97 (1.08)	7.49***
I have sufficient knowledge of penology.	3.21 (0.97)	3.19 (0.89)	2.29 (1.06)	3.48 (1.06)	7.02***
I have sufficient knowledge to deal with addicts.	2.68 (0.96)	3.11 (0.94)	2.29 (0.64)	2.61 (1.09)	4.86***
I have sufficient knowledge of administrative procedures.	3.20 (1.00)	3.53 (0.87)	2.67 (0.86)	3.68 (0.95)	6.28***
I have sufficient knowledge of criminal law.	3.18 (0.99)	3.04 (0.80)	2.38 (0.97)	3.42 (1.15)	5.40***
I have sufficient knowledge of procedural rules and other legal documents.	3.53 (0.87)	3.42 (0.93)	2.14 (0.96)	3.68 (0.98)	16.07***
I have sufficient knowledge of psychiatry.	2.52 (0.99)	2.44 (0.98)	2.05 (0.81)	2.13 (0.92)	2.58
I have sufficient knowledge of first aid.	3.65 (0.86)	2.84 (0.96)	3.29 (0.64)	3.23 (0.92)	13.39***
I have sufficient knowledge of stress management techniques.	3.16 (1.02)	3.51 (0.87)	2.81 (0.87)	3.23 (0.85)	3.16*
Wilks' lambda	.41***				

Note: Data are given in *M* (*SD*) format. Scale: from 1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Compared to other groups, managerial staff perceived their own competencies in the fields of criminology, criminalistics, penology, administrative procedures, criminal law, procedural rules and other legal documents more positively. Differences between the groups appear mainly in the areas that comprise the specific tasks of each group, for example, the knowledge of self-defence is primarily intended for prison officers who take care of ensuring safety and security in prisons and the correctional home; specific knowledge in the fields of andragogy and pedagogy, as well as psychology, is required of treatment workers who implement treatment programs; and broader knowledge of legislation, administrative procedures and sciences related to the causes of criminality is required of managerial staff who are responsible for the management of institutions and prison workers, as well as strategic decisions. At the same time, all groups of prison workers perceived themselves as relatively well physically prepared for work, trained for peaceful conflict resolution and with sufficient computer skills, while their knowledge of foreign languages is average, and their psychiatric knowledge is relatively low, which is understandable, as it cannot be expected from prison workers to have advanced psychiatric knowledge (Table 3).

To assess the differences in the needs of individual groups of prison workers for additional training, the One-Way MANOVA model was employed (Table 4). Results (Wilks' lambda = .63; $p < .001$) confirmed the assumptions on the dependence of the need for additional training on work position, as statistically significant differences between prison workers' needs for additional training in: (1) self-defence, (2) stress management techniques, (3) communication skills, (4) psychology, (5) penology, (6) group dynamics, (7) treatment of drug addiction, (8) andragogy, and (9) law among observed groups were identified.

Bonferroni post-hoc test results revealed that statistically significant differences exist between: (1) police officers and work instructors ($p < .001$) in their needs for additional training of self-defence, (2) prison officers and treatment workers ($p < .01$) in their needs for additional communication skills, (3) prison officers and treatment workers ($p < .01$) in their needs for additional knowledge of andragogy, (4) prison officers and treatment workers ($p < .001$), prison officers and managerial staff ($p < .05$), and treatment workers and work instructors ($p < .01$) in their needs for additional knowledge of group dynamics, (5) prison officers and treatment workers ($p < .01$) and treatment workers and work instructors ($p < .01$) in their needs for additional knowledge of psychology, (6) prison officers and treatment workers ($p < .01$) and treatment workers and work instructors ($p < .01$) in their needs for additional knowledge of penology, (7) prison officers and treatment workers ($p < .001$) and treatment workers and work instructors ($p < .05$) in their needs for additional knowledge of treatment of drug addicts, (8) prison officers and treatment workers ($p < .01$) and treatment workers and work instructors ($p < .01$) their needs for additional knowledge of law, and (9) treatment

workers and work instructors ($p < .01$) and work instructors and managerial staff ($p < .01$) in their needs for additional skills of stress management (Table 4).

A comparison of prison officers, treatment workers, work instructors, and managerial staff showed that prison officers perceive self-defence as an area of additional training that would be most useful to them when working in a prison environment. Treatment workers highlighted: (1) communication skills (these were also highlighted as the most important by work instructors), (2) psychology, (3) law and penology, (4) group dynamics and andragogy, and (6) treatment of drug addictions, as fields where additional training would be appreciated. Compared to other groups, managerial staff singled out stress management techniques and computer skills as the most important topics of additional training. The desire for specific additional knowledge stems from the very nature of the work, where prison officers are primarily responsible for providing safety and security and well-being of prisoners, treatment workers and work instructors for the resocialisation of prisoners, and managerial staff for the management of prisons and the correctional home. Moreover, additional training in first aid, foreign languages, criminology and criminalistics, psychiatric knowledge, and administrative procedures would be desirable or even necessary for all prison workers, as the values are relatively high.

Table 4

One-Way MANOVA Model: Prison Workers' Assessment of Needs for Additional Training

Variables	Prison officers ($n = 184$)	Treatment workers ($n = 56$)	Work instructors ($n = 23$)	Managerial staff ($n = 30$)	F
Self-defence	4.28 (0.76)	4.04 (0.99)	3.48 (0.85)	3.87 (1.11)	7.61***
Stress management techniques	4.29 (0.77)	4.46 (0.66)	3.87 (0.92)	4.57 (0.63)	4.63*
Communication skills	4.19 (0.79)	4.57 (0.63)	4.09 (0.59)	4.47 (0.68)	4.98**
First aid	4.17 (0.81)	3.89 (1.02)	3.91 (0.59)	4.07 (0.74)	2.01
Psychology	4.01 (0.84)	4.43 (0.63)	3.74 (1.01)	4.20 (0.89)	5.32**
Knowledge of foreign languages	3.97 (0.85)	4.29 (0.89)	3.87 (0.87)	4.10 (0.61)	2.36
Penology	3.89 (0.83)	4.25 (0.75)	3.52 (0.95)	4.07 (0.98)	4.87*
Computer skills	3.86 (0.81)	3.98 (0.90)	3.91 (0.67)	4.07 (0.52)	0.79
Group dynamics	3.85 (0.81)	4.36 (0.69)	3.70 (0.77)	4.27 (0.83)	8.22***
Criminology	3.77 (0.88)	3.82 (0.92)	3.35 (1.07)	3.63 (0.89)	1.80
Criminalistics	3.73 (0.91)	3.75 (1.01)	3.30 (1.06)	3.47 (0.94)	1.97
Treatment of drug addiction	3.72 (0.90)	4.39 (0.76)	3.70 (0.88)	3.87 (1.17)	8.24***
Psychiatric knowledge	3.62 (0.93)	3.91 (1.08)	3.30 (0.97)	3.40 (1.07)	2.95
Andragogy	3.60 (0.88)	4.02 (0.79)	3.61 (0.72)	3.70 (0.84)	3.57*
Administration	3.41 (0.92)	3.43 (0.97)	3.35 (1.03)	3.43 (1.01)	0.05
Law	3.40 (0.93)	3.91 (0.86)	3.13 (1.10)	3.67 (0.99)	5.75***
Wilks' Lambda	.63***				

Note: Data are given in $M (SD)$ format. Scale: from 1 – strongly disagree to 5 – strongly agree.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Discussion

Archambeault and Archambeault (1982: xxii) wrote that prison workers are the primary resource available to prisons to fulfil their mission. Based on their writings and the fact that prison workers possess a high degree of discretionary power (Kifer et al., 2003), it is clear that quality training and their possession of appropriate competencies are crucial for successfully implementing the aims of punishment. Adequacy of training and competencies is critical in resocialisation-oriented prison systems, where prison staff [partially] have to give up the traditional coercive power over prisoners, as prisoners are subjugated to prison rules by using soft methods that are based on a humane approach to working with prisoners (Hacin & Meško, 2020). Soft power can be described as the essential component of the broader form of “neo-paternalism”, within which coercion in direct orders to prisoners or ‘hard power’ is unnecessary (Crewe, 2011; Nye, 2004). The current study focused on exploring similarities and differences between different groups of prison workers’ self-assessment of the quality of training and their own competence for work in prison, as well as the need for additional training.

Overall, work satisfaction among different groups of prison workers can be assessed as average. Besides the stressful and [occasionally] dangerous nature of prison work, the situation has worsened for Slovenian prison workers in recent years due to increased overcrowding, a large number of foreign prisoners from non-European countries that prevent the implementation of treatment programs and present a greater security risk due to lack of understanding of the language, inadequate wages (especially for prison officers), lack of prison workers, etc. (Hacin et al., 2022; Uprava Republike Slovenije za izvrševanje kazenskih sankcij, 2023). The differences in prison staff’s highlighting different forms of main tasks by individual groups were expected due to the nature and requirements of the job: prison officers (safety and security), treatment workers (resocialisation), work instructors (resocialisation), and managerial staff (management). The prior education of prison workers does not prepare them for work in the prison environment or with prisoners. This problem was reflected in prison workers’ expressed opinions regarding the needed qualifications for the position they occupy (viewed as a whole, only prison officers expressed confidence about appropriate qualifications, as they have to complete comprehensive basic training), but also in need for additional training, as a significant proportion of all groups of prison workers expressed a desire for additional skills (the most important proportion was observed among treatment workers – 61%), due to new challenges that appeared in recent years mentioned above. It has to be emphasised that in Slovenia, there are no secondary/high school programs that would at least partially relate to work in prison. Still, certain penological subjects are included in programs of some higher education institutions (e.g., Faculty of Criminal

Justice and Security, University of Maribor). However, only a handful of prison workers graduate from these programs. All groups of prison workers participated in additional training and mostly expressed satisfaction with its content, which indicated that the leadership of the Slovenian Prison Administration is aware of the problem of prison workers' lack of knowledge and skills, especially in recent years when they have faced new challenges. Consequently, additional training is carried out regularly, and the quality of the content can be described as informative and beneficial for prison workers. Bottoms (1999) argued that if training for prison workers is carried out sporadically rather than constantly, prisoners may begin to question prison workers' legitimacy, who must represent professionals familiar with the latest penological findings for their assigned areas (e.g., ensuring security, addiction treatment, psychological help, etc.).

Deriving from the prison staff's self-assessment of their own competence, it can be argued that most prison officers (88%) and approximately half of the treatment workers (53%) are adequately qualified for the work they perform. Slovenian prison officers possess most of the exemplary competencies characteristic of prison guards (e.g., physical fitness, ability to resolve disputes peacefully, communication skills, procedural rules, etc.), which have also been highlighted in foreign studies (Kriminalforsogens Uddannelsescenter, 1994; Liebling & Price, 1999). The findings showed that prison officers also have [at least] basic knowledge in fields that do not primarily relate to safety and security but basic knowledge in areas traditionally associated with treatment workers (andragogy, pedagogy, etc.). Treatment workers and work instructors highlighted a wide range of knowledge and skills (communication skills, pedagogy, penology, addiction treatment, psychology, etc.) necessary to implement treatment programs successfully (Bonta, 1995; Hulley et al., 2012; Marshall, 2005), and while treatment workers have obtained such knowledge and skills, the same cannot be said for work instructors resulting in low self-assessment of their own competence (35%). Compared to prison officers, the knowledge of treatment workers and work instructors is more focused, from which we can conclude that: 1) the work of prison officers is complex and requires all-round knowledge (the work process requires the involvement/presence of prison officers in almost all aspects of the implementation of prison sentences) and 2) treatment workers and work instructors focus predominantly on the work tasks they perform and have no desire for additional skills that could be useful but are of secondary importance for their work performance. There is also a possibility that prison officers have an excessively good idea of themselves as "experts" in all fields. Like prison officers, managerial staff expressed all-around competence resulting from their experience "on the job", as they have worked as prison officers or treatment workers before taking managerial positions. In addition, they possess key skills (administration, official procedures, legislation, etc.), which enable them to run institutions and work with (i.e., lead) other prison workers.

It has to be noted that relying [merely] on the values of the variables related to the suitability of the training of prison workers, which are mostly high, can lead to erroneous assumptions that there is no need to change/upgrade the existing forms of training. We estimate that high values in the self-assessment of competence reflect the current situation in Slovenian prisons (overcrowding, lack of staff, a large proportion of foreigners, etc.), where the implementation of traditional treatment programs is severely limited. Consequently, prison workers perform only “basic tasks” for which they are sufficiently qualified since implementing the resocialisation of prisoners requires greater engagement and advanced knowledge and skills from the individual that goes beyond the minimal performance of work tasks (Hacin & Meško, 2024). Prison workers’ self-assessment of the need for additional training confirms our assumptions, as all groups of prison workers highlighted the need for additional knowledge and skills. It has to be emphasised that all groups of prison workers highlighted a strong desire/need to learn stress management techniques, which indicates the seriousness of prison work and experiencing stress at the workplace. The nature of work in the prison environment [can] lead to negative consequences for the individual in the psychological and physical spheres (Dollard et al., 2001; Neveu, 2007), which results in the premature departure of the individual from the prison system. An occurrence that has, in recent years, become an increasing problem in Slovenia.

Limitations

As with all empirical studies based on convenience samples, the problem of representativeness of results should be acknowledged, as the answers of the participated prison workers may systematically vary from the answers of a representative sample. Due to the quantitative nature of the data, there is a possibility that prison workers gave socially desirable answers during the survey due to fear of disclosure and possible sanctions that would follow. We tried to prevent such behaviour by ensuring anonymity and confidentiality before the surveying.

Conclusion

The current study presents the continuation of wider research on prison workers’ competencies and legitimacy in Slovenia (Meško et al., 2022). It presents the first study on similarities and differences in training and required competencies of different groups of prison workers in Slovenia based on a convenience sample of prison workers. The results of statistical analyses highlighted key competencies and the importance of specific training for each group of prison workers, as well as similarities and differences in the self-

assessment of the competence of prison workers, which significantly complements the existing knowledge about the training, competencies and professionalism of prison workers; especially with treatment workers, work instructors, and managerial staff, as most studies focus on prison officers (e.g., Castle & Martin, 2006; Lambert et al., 2018; Liebling et al., 2011). Based on the findings, the following suggestions for practice, particularly for improving prison workers' training, can be made. For the future development of Slovenian penology and penal practice, it is necessary that comprehensive training for all groups of prison workers is introduced since basic training is only available to prison officers. As findings showed, despite achieving higher education, professional workers have acquired mostly theoretical knowledge in a wide variety of treatment programs. However, most do not focus on the treatment of prisoners. The same applies to work instructors since involving prisoners in work duties during imprisonment not only means teaching them new work skills but is also part of the resocialisation process of an individual (i.e., internalisation of work habits). By considering the current situation in the Slovenian prison system, the following recommendations could be made for an individual group of prison workers: (1) prison officers should have the possibility to improve their knowledge of self-defence, acquire knowledge of at least one foreign language and the basic knowledge of dealing with addicts, which would enable them to act appropriately in cases where prisoner experiences a crisis, (2) treatment workers (and work instructors) should gain additional knowledge of penology, and acquire [at least basic] knowledge of foreign languages and additional practical knowledge of addiction treatment (for work instructors, the last recommendation does not apply), and (3) managers should improve their knowledge of criminology and penology, legislation and foreign languages, which would enable them to have a comprehensive insight into the implementation of prison sentences in Slovenia.

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The authors affirm that their paper is in full compliance with ethical standards. They declare that no potential conflicts of interest are obtained with respect to the research, authorship, and/or separate publication of this article.

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