

Building Professional Competence of Prison Staff: Psychological, Pedagogical, and Legal Aspects

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Abstract: Considering the war in Ukraine, the study of the main aspects of building the professional competence of the prison staff is a current priority task of the State Penitentiary Service of Ukraine. The objective of the study is to determine the components of professional competence of the prison staff in Ukraine. Methods. The Social Readjustment Rating Scale, the Bass Personality Orientation Test, and the Coping Strategy Indicator (CSI). Statistical analysis involves the use of descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. Results. Graduates of the penitentiary system have formed general and special professional competencies, including partial stress resistance, coping with problem solving, and motivational focus on the task. It has been proven that general professional competencies are directly related to professionally important qualities ($p \leq 0.01$). Conclusions. The results can be used by higher education institutions (HEIs) to adjust professional training programs for prison staff. Heads of penal institutions can consider the obtained results when selecting staff for positions. The results are useful for the professional self-development of specialists, as they indicate the qualities and competencies that they need to develop. Prospects. Further study may focus on determining how the professional competencies of the prison staff are built at different stages of their professional activities.

Keywords: Criminal enforcement service, motivation of professional activity, offence, professional training, professionally important qualities.

INTRODUCTION

The full-scale invasion of the enemy on the territory of Ukraine resulted in an urgent need to review and improve the penal system as the main institution for the implementation of state criminal enforcement policy. Reforming the penal system of Ukraine requires a qualitative change in approaches to the training of prison staff and requires the development of a new model for building their professional competence [1], [2]. This task can be fulfilled through the active involvement of leading foreign practices in training prison staff, as the level of security in society depends on the level of their professional competence [3].

The professional training of prison staff includes educational training based on law education and a system of continuous improvement of professional qualifications [4]. Professional competence is a condition of the ability to work in one's professional field [5], develop knowledge, accept responsibility, plan, and continue development [6].

The effectiveness of the State Criminal Enforcement Service of Ukraine's (SCESU) work depends on the staff's professional training level and the ability to perform professional tasks in stressful situations [7]. The main task of the professional training of prison staff is the development of specific competencies with a view to the developed motivational readiness to work with prisoners under the constant influence of the criminal subculture of the community [8]. Such qualities as stress resistance, effective coping strategies [9], and motivational orientation [10] are no less important.

The professional activity of prison staff is considered one of the most stressful in the world because they work in very difficult conditions [11]. A significant role in this process is playing resistance to the environment's negative effects and the ability to resolve any difficult situations [12]. Therefore, training specialists in the penal system is a complex and long process that depends on the personal qualities of the staff and on the ability to quickly adapt to professional activities [13]. Considering these factors enables employers to align employee expectations and review training and recruitment, which can improve employee well-being and reduce employee turnover [10].

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According to the 2026 Penal System Reform Strategy, one of the main tasks is forming an “effective model of training and activity of the staff employed in the bodies and institutions of the penal system” [14]. This proves the relevance of studying the problem of building the professional competence of specialists in the penal system.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

The aim is to determine the level of professional competencies of prison staff in Ukraine at the stage of professionalisation.

Research objectives:

- Diagnose the level of formation of general and special professional competencies of graduates of the Penitentiary Academy;
- Identify the level of stress resistance, coping strategies, and professional orientation of prison staff;
- Establish a connection between the general and special competencies of specialists and their professionally important qualities.

Research hypothesis: professional training of prison staff involves the relationship between professional competencies and professionally important qualities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Professional competence is the ability to work effectively in one’s professional field. It is acquired along with qualification in a certain specialisation, and the acquired knowledge is applied in practice [6]. The essence of professional competence is in-depth knowledge of the subject, a set of knowledge and professionally significant personal qualities that determine the effectiveness of professional activity [15].

The professional competence of specialists of the SCESU is defined as the result of completing the qualification program and expresses the ability to serve as rank-and-file and senior members in the bodies and institutions of the SCESU. An important element of the professional competence of SCESU employees is the ability to perform professional duties considering special and general knowledge [11].

The main components of the professional competence of the SCESU specialists should be basic professional knowledge, readiness to use modern

innovative technologies, a high level of self-development, assimilation of key general cultural and professional knowledge, etc. [16]. Therefore, today the professional training of specialists of the SCESU is a purposeful process that is clearly regulated and is aimed at acquiring knowledge and skills for the successful performance of official duties [17].

Professional training of prison staff provides for the development of narrow professional competencies and professionally important qualities [18]. In particular, it is emphasised that stress resistance is an important component of professional training and ensures the stability of professional activity [19]. The ability to overcome stressful situations and choose the most effective behavioural strategies enables specialists to perform professional tasks productively and competently [20]. Developed resistance to stress is a condition for effective work and the employees’ ability to overcome obstacles [4]. The involvement of prison employees in programs to reduce stress and build stress resistance is an indispensable condition for improving their professional competence [21].

Special attention is paid to the motivational component of professional competence in training qualified prison staff [8]. High motivational orientation is a condition for quality work, provides a career path in a correctional institution, and stimulates productivity [22]. Prison staff must be highly motivated to perform professional tasks [23], as the role of the penitentiary service in the system of public security and legal functioning of the country is quite high [24]. Motivational orientation is the basis of professional competence, as it was established that despite the level of education of prison staff, the problem of professional training is a decrease in motivation to work [25].

The coping strategies of prison staff are equally important. The concept of “coping” expresses a personal resource that enables one to overcome stressful situations. Stress-coping behaviour involves the elimination or reduction of the stress factor and aims at successful adaptation to the situation [26]. Coping behaviour is particularly important in the penal system, as it allows employees to more effectively resolve problem situations, mobilise their own strength, and provide resistance to negative influences [27]. This suggests that coping strategies are an important component of the professional competence of prison staff, but they require more careful attention during professional training [28].

3. METHODS

3.1. The Research Design

A prospective descriptive study was conducted, which consisted in the analysis of academic performance and the level of professional competencies of the graduates of the Penitentiary Academy. The study lasted 5 months, from January 2024 to May 2024. The duration is determined by monitoring the educational achievements of graduates, which made it possible to gradually study the development of their general and special competencies. The research was conducted in 4 stages. The first stage provided for the selection of diagnostic tests and the organisation of diagnostics. The second stage involved the diagnostics of graduates in parallel during school hours. The third stage provided for quantitative, qualitative, and statistical analysis of the obtained data. At the fourth stage, a description of the results, conclusions, and prospects was carried out.

3.2. Sampling

A representative sample of 250 subjects aged 20 to 25 (average age 23.4 ± 3.2) was selected for the study, which represents the totality of persons receiving penitentiary education. Of them, 157 are men and 103 are women. Assessment of the formation of professional competences is possible only at the stage of completion of studies, when all educational disciplines and basic knowledge have been mastered. Therefore, the selection criterion was studying at the graduation course at the higher education institution Penitentiary Academy of Ukraine. A typical random selection of respondents meeting the inclusion criteria was carried out. In particular, 70 subjects were from the Department of Pedagogy and Humanities, 60 were from the Department of Psychology, 70 were from the Department of Tactical Special Training, and 50 were from the Department of Physical Training. Including people from different areas allows for a more in-depth analysis of future specialists' general and special competencies. The exclusion criterion was the age of less than 20 years, since professional competences have not yet been formed at the early stages of education.

3.3. Methods

Four main components have been identified – motivational, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural – to

identify the level of professional competence of prison staff based on the analysis of the educational and qualification characteristics of the major.

To study the cognitive component, the most important competencies that represent the basis of readiness for professional activity were selected from the list of competencies that graduates of the Academy of the State Penitentiary Service must have and the requirements of regulatory documents, in particular the Law of Ukraine "On the State Penitentiary Service of Ukraine". They were evaluated on the basis of educational achievements of graduates with gradation of levels: undeveloped competence, partially developed competence, and fully developed competence. The following are the most important professional competencies.

General

- awareness of the social significance of the future profession;
- basic professional knowledge;
- the ability to competently use normative legislation in professional activities;
- readiness to perform official duties in the system of criminal punishments;

Special

- ensuring law and order in penal institutions;
- the ability to make legal decisions and perform legal actions in compliance with the legislation;
- the ability to critically analyse modern legal mechanisms for the protection in the system of execution of punishments;
- the ability to determine the main problems in countering offences;
- the ability to learn and implement innovative methods in professional activities.

The emotional component included the study of stress resistance. Stress resistance was studied using the Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale or the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS). The test allows you to reveal the level of an individual's ability to withstand the effects of stress and overcome its consequences independently. The lower the scores on the test, the higher the stress resistance, and vice versa, high scores indicate low stress resistance. The Bass Personality Orientation Test was used to study the motivational component. The test is an orientational

questionnaire to determine the motivational orientation of an individual. According to the test, three types of orientation are distinguished: on oneself, on communication, and on business. Focusing on professional tasks is important for professional activity.

The behavioural component was studied with the help of J. Amirkhan's Coping Strategy Indicator (CSI) test. The test implies studying the basic coping strategies of behaviour: solving problems, seeking social support, and avoidance. Behavioural strategies reflect the style of response in difficult and crisis situations and make it possible to predict the effectiveness of behavioural responses of employees in difficult circumstances.

Statistical analysis included the use of descriptive analysis to present the average values of the tests and correlational analysis using the Pearson correlation coefficient (since the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test confirmed the normality of the data distribution) in order to establish the relationship between the emotional and volitional, behavioural, and motivational components and the professional competencies of future prison staff.

4. RESULTS

The results showed that the graduates of the Penitentiary Academy have developed professional competencies at a high level, which contribute to effective professional activity (Table 1).

According to the obtained data, the largest share of variance is made up of such competencies as the

ability to critically analyse current legal mechanisms for the protection in the system of execution of punishments; basic professional knowledge; ensuring law and order in penal institutions; and the ability to identify the main problems in countering crime. This is an indicator of the developed cognitive component of the professional competence of future prison staff. It was found that most of the prison staff have a medium level of stress resistance (Figure 1). According to the obtained data, only 28.08% have high stress resistance, which may be a consequence of military operations in the country.

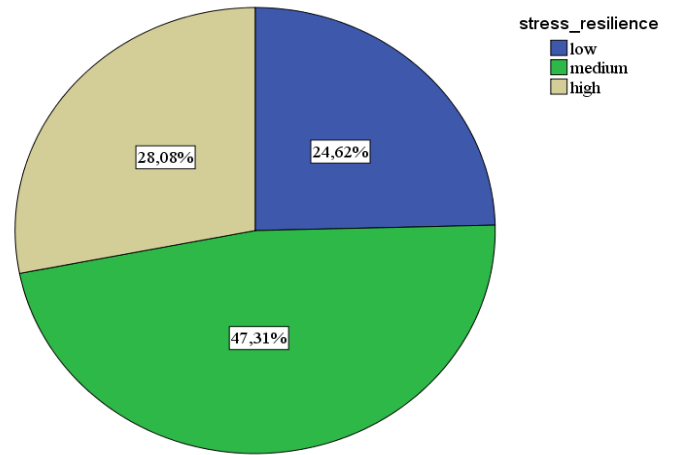


Figure 1: Indicators of stress resistance and risk-taking (N=250).

The results prove that the majority of prison staff have problem-solving strategies (Table 2). It was found that future prison staff have a predominant problem-solving strategy, which involves solving a critical situation. Specialists with such a strategy actively cope

Table 1: Indicators of Professional Competencies of Future Prison Staff (N=250)

Professional Competencies		Undeveloped Competence	Partially Developed Competence	Fully Developed Competence
general	awareness of the social significance of the future profession	2%	28%	70%
	basic professional knowledge	3%	19%	78%
	the ability to competently use normative legislation in professional activities	7%	23%	70%
	readiness to perform official duties in the field of execution of criminal punishments;	4%	20%	76%
special	ensuring law and order in penal institutions	0%	22%	78%
	the ability to make legal decisions and perform legal actions in compliance with the legislation	2%	14%	84%
	the ability to critically analyse modern legal mechanisms for the protection in the system of execution of punishments	0	18%	82%
	the ability to determine the main problems in countering offences	2%	8%	90%
	the ability to learn and implement innovative methods in professional activities	0	12%	88%

Table 2: Medium Indicators of Coping Strategies of Prison Staff (N=250)

Strategy	Min	Max	Mean	SD
problem solving	15.61	33.73	31.24	0.78
seeking social support	7.42	23.84	22.75	0.77
avoidance	14.38	22.37	21.64	1.36

Table 3: Average Indicators of Orientation of Prison Staff (N=250)

Orientation	Min	Max	Mean	SD
On oneself	11.35	24.1	17.73	7.54
On communication	15.93	25.78	20.86	9.91
On task	17.36	26.48	21.92	8.74

with resolving stressful situations, which allows them to make decisions as efficiently as possible in a short period of time.

The study of the motivational component showed that the prison staff are task-orientated (Table 3). It was found that the respondents' motivational orientation on task is the most important, while self-focus is the least pronounced. Such results show that professional activity is the most important in the motivational orientation of prison staff.

Correlation analysis made it possible to reveal the connection between the general professional competencies of specialists and their professionally important qualities (Table 4).

A direct, significant relationship between general professional competencies and professionally important qualities was established ($p \leq 0.05$). The highest coefficients were established between

readiness to perform official duties in the field of execution of criminal punishments and stress resistance, task orientation. Very high coefficients were found between the ability to competently use normative legislation in professional activities and stress resistance, problem-solving strategy, and task orientation. Basic knowledge of professional activity is highly correlated with task orientation.

The established correlation coefficients within 0.5-0.7 correspond to an average effect size, and coefficients greater than 0.8 correspond to a high effect size, according to J. Cohen.

Quite high coefficients were also found between professionally important qualities and special abilities (Table 5).

The obtained coefficients show a close direct connection between the special professional

Table 4: Correlational Analysis of the Connection between General Professional Competencies of Specialists and their Professionally Important Qualities

Professional Competencies	Stress Resistance	Coping Strategies			Motivational Orientation		
		Problem Solving	Seeking Social Support	Avoidance	On Oneself	On Communication	On Task
awareness of the social significance of the future profession;	0.538*		0.699**			0.674**	
basic professional knowledge;		0.598**					0.739**
the ability to competently use normative legislation in professional activities	0.722**	0.790**		-0.637**			0.805**
readiness to perform official duties in the field of execution of criminal punishments;	0.827**						0.877**

Note: * - $p \leq 0.05$, ** - $p \leq 0.01$.

Table 5: Correlational Analysis of the Connection between Special Professional Competencies of Specialists and their Professionally Important Qualities

Professional Competencies	Stress Resistance	Coping Strategies			Motivational Orientation		
		Problem Solving	Seeking Social Support	Avoidance	On Oneself	On Communication	On Task
ensuring law and order in penal institutions;			0.402*				0.579**
the ability to make legal decisions and perform legal actions in compliance with the legislation;	0.670*	0.833**			0.380**		0.783*
the ability to critically analyse modern legal mechanisms for the protection in the system of execution of punishments;	0.729**		0.744**			0.437*	
the ability to determine the main problems in countering offences;	0.680**		0.440*				0.797**
the ability to learn and implement innovative methods in professional activities.	0.749*						

Note: ** - $p \leq 0.01$, * - $p \leq 0.05$.

competencies of specialists and their professionally important qualities. The largest coefficients were found between the ability to make law-based decisions and perform legal actions in exact accordance with the legislation and problem-solving strategy, task orientation; between the ability to critically analyse modern legal mechanisms for the protection in the system of execution of punishments and stress resistance, seeking social support; the ability to identify the main problems in countering offences and task orientation; the ability to learn and implement innovative methods in professional activity.

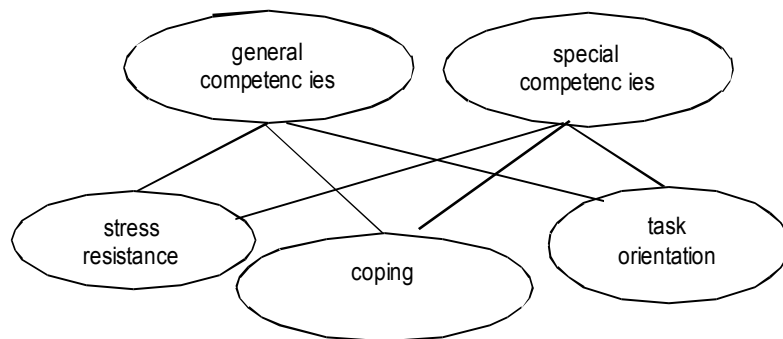
The established correlation coefficients between 0.5-0.7 correspond to an average effect size, and coefficients greater than 0.8 to a high effect size, according to J. Cohen.

It has been proved that professional competencies are highly related to professionally important qualities (Figure 2). Therefore, professional training should be based on the development of both specific competencies according to the qualification programme and developing qualities useful for work.

The obtained coefficients show a direct correlation between professional competencies and professionally important qualities. This proves that the professional training of the prison staff should include the development of professional competencies, as well as qualities that contribute to professional activity.

5. DISCUSSION

The results showed that prison staff had developed professional competencies, partial stress resistance,



Note: direct correlation ($p \leq 0.01$)

Figure 2: The correlation of professional competencies and professionally important qualities of prison staff.

motivational orientation on professional activity, and constructive coping strategies in critical situations. A direct correlation was found between professional competencies and professionally important qualities. This allows us to assert that the formation of professional competence is a complex phenomenon and requires taking into account additional means of developing professionally important personal traits. It was proved that the higher the level of general and professional competencies, the ability to apply knowledge and skills in practice, the higher the prison staff's stress resistance, problem-solving strategy, and orientation on professional tasks.

Similar results were found in other studies, which showed that prison staff should have a high stress resistance [19] to maintain personal balance in critical situations or in the face of a threat [6]. This is important because staff who experience stress or conflict are more punitive towards inmates [3]. It was proved that employees with high stress resistance are more successful specialists and mostly have a long professional experience [29]. This should be paid special attention in further research and analysing the dependence of seniority and professional competence. However, it was also proved that programs for the formation of resistance to stressful situations of prison staff are less effective if such qualities have not been developed at the stage of professional training [11].

It was established that prison staff have constructive coping strategies that contribute to a successful exit from conflict and stressful situations [7]. They rarely seek social support and mostly use problem-solving strategies [30]. This enables operational decisions to be made, which is quite important in the work of penitentiaries.

We discovered that the motivation to perform professional tasks prevails. Klishevich and Sulitskyi [8] reached the same conclusion. They proved that the motivational orientation develops at the stages of choosing a profession and studying in HEI and completes its formation in the first three years of service. This proves that the qualification period is an important stage in assimilating professional competencies [31]. Moreover, it was proved that the motivational orientation of prison staff ensures better work performance [32] and is a priority component of professional training [33].

The motivational orientation of prison staff is also an important component of professional training, as it was proved that it affects the duration of work in penal institutions and career growth [22]. An interesting study presents arguments in favour of purposeful development of motivational orientation, which, according to experts, can stimulate the process of change and the achievement of organisational goals [34]. This can be realised through special training of work motivation according to market needs [10]. So, it is quite likely that the motivational orientation of prison staff can and should be stimulated by special methods.

However, in previous studies there are gaps in determining the components of special competencies of penitentiary system employees and their professionally important qualities. In this case, the ethno-national factor may play a role when the peculiarities of nationality can determine their own list of necessary qualities of penitentiary service employees. In addition, it is worth paying attention to the fact that the performance of professional duties depends on their stress resistance, ability to successfully cope with occupational hazards, and motivation to work [35]. From this we can conclude that professional competence is inseparable from professional qualities, which should be stimulated by the administration of penitentiary institutions.

6. CONCLUSION

The development of prison staff's professional competence involves building general and special competencies, respectively, according to the program requirements of the educational qualification level. These results are useful for higher education institutions, which can give more careful weight to the formation of the identified qualities, as they are shown to be indeed related to professional competencies. Also, the results can be applied in penitentiary institutions to add the qualities and competencies studied to the list necessary when hiring employees. Given the results, it can be recommended that higher education institutions develop a comprehensive program for the formation of professional competencies and professional qualities, which would include an assessment of their formation and compliance with a specifically chosen profession. The practical value of the study is that the results can be applied not only to the training of students of the penitentiary system but also to already working penitentiaries in order to improve their professional qualifications.

The limitations of the study are additional factors that can influence the formation of professional competence of penitentiary service specialists. Among them are socio-economic changes, personal factors, politics, and, in particular, the military, taking into account the state of war in Ukraine.

These results are useful for HEIs, which can give more careful attention to the formation of the identified qualities, as they are proven to be related to professional competencies. The results can also be applied in penal institutions for the purpose of adding the studied qualities and competencies to the list of necessary ones when hiring employees.

The research limitations are additional factors that can influence the development of professional competence of prison staff. These include socio-economic changes, personal factors, political factors, and military factors, taking into account the state of war in Ukraine.

6.1. Recommendations

Research prospects may be the study of the professional competencies of prison staff in terms of length of service. Attention shall be paid to professional motivation at the beginning of work and after 5-10-20 years of experience. Motivational orientation can be developed with additional incentives and awards for professional achievements. It is also advisable to apply social guarantees, additional holidays, weekends, etc.

It is also appropriate to study which personal qualities of prison staff contribute most to their professionalism.

Developing and implementing a program for building professionally important skills and personal qualities in parallel with the educational process will be useful. Such a program should be introduced into the educational process as an additional discipline, which will make it possible to increase the success rate of specialists.

It is appropriate to introduce active internships of graduates in penal institutions into the education system to improve their professional knowledge and skills for building professional competence. To improve the training of specialists, it is advisable to allocate more hours to educational programs for industrial practice and internships in penitentiary institutions. At

the same time, it is worth studying the effectiveness of such an internship and adjusting the results.

It is also appropriate to study socio-demographic characteristics and their influence on the quality of training of prison staff. For this purpose, the factors of age, gender, social class, family status, and ethnic and religious characteristics can be included in the study.

A mandatory element of professional competence is psychological readiness to work in penal institutions. Therefore, it is necessary to study the state of psychological readiness as part of the qualification characteristics of the graduate.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed equally to data analysis, drafting, and revising of the paper and approved this work.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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