KNOWLEDGE ABOUT PSYCHOLOGISTS AND THEIR WORK
IN THE POPULATION OF THE WIELKOPOLSKA PROVINCE

WIEDZA O PSYCHOLOGACH I ICH PRACY
WŚRÓD OSOB ZAMIESZKUJĄCYCH WIELKOPOLSKĘ

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Summary

Introduction. Twenty – two years ago Poland introduced market economy and the Polish society has been witnessing revolution in all aspects of life ever since. On the one hand, transformation should influence a change in psychologists’ work because their clients have completely new psychological problems. On the other hand, the clients should know what they could expect from psychologists.

Aim. This paper was an attempt to answer the question: “what do Poles know about psychologists?”

Methods. Our paper was based on questionnaire research of 205 respondents. The main items of the questionnaire referred to who, according to respondents, psychologists are, what problems they deal with and where they work. The analysis took into account respondents’ age, gender, place of living and the level of education.

Results. The investigation indicated that knowledge about psychologists and help they can provide is too scarce.

Conclusions. Psychologists and their work remain undervalued and unnoticed in many fields of life. One may hypothesize that mass media, particularly TV and Internet, are the main source of information about psychology for people living in the Wielkopolska province.

KEY WORDS: crisis intervention, psychology, applied, psychotherapy, social work, social support.

Introduction. In 1989, Poland – a former Eastern Bloc country – regained political independence and stepped on its way towards economic reforms. They were followed by changes in social relations connected with privatization of the so far state-owned companies and emerging gap between the poor and the rich. The changes were swift and very abrupt so Polish people were unprepared and had to adjust themselves to a completely new situation. Though transitions in all aspects of life are accompanied by such adverse phenomena as soaring crime, rampant unemployment rate (ca. 13%) and increasing number of suicides. One might say that these alterations should, at least theoretically, lead to a growing demand for psychological help. However, before 1989, the official propaganda in Poland indicated that the socialist system endorsed well-being and social justice so psychologists were not necessary. Additionally, the communist Poland was a welfare state where everybody could get a job; unemployment, homelessness or poverty officially did not exist. The government – controlled press did not report about adverse phenomena, even about crime (murder, rape or robbery) because crime was supposed to be scarce in this ideal system. Simultaneously, members of the Polish society were very cautious about making any critical comments on political situation or interpersonal relations. A number of people looked for help and consolation in the church, talking to their priests. Now, the situation has evolved – Poland is a young democracy and a free market economy. Our problems are typical for transformation e.g., people may have a brand new problems (for example how to find a job). Due to this, our paper is an attempt to find out whether citizens of Poland know the nature of the psychologists’ work, the way psychologists help people and the tasks they perform. The goal of this study was also to learn whether the knowledge about psychologists is influenced by such factors as age, gender, place of living and level of education.

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Material and methods

The study was carried out on citizens of Poland. Questionnaires were directed to over 600 residents of the Midwestern Polish province of Wielkopolska and as many as 205 of them responded (34%). The four-page self-administered questionnaire consisted of eight open questions and demographic information. The subjects, who were recruited from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and had no professional connotations to psychology, were asked to anonymously answer such questions as:

1. What are psychologists?
2. What do psychologists do?
3. Where do psychologists work?
4. When are psychologists useful?
5. What people ask psychologists for advice?
6. What do you think about psychologists?
7. When would you consult a psychologist?
8. Have you or any of your friends/colleagues ever consulted a psychologist? Tell us about the visit.

The answers to each question were analysed and sorted out in accordance with patterns, which were based on elaborated answers.

The respondents also had to fill out demographic information concerning their gender (137 women and 68 men), age (adolescents /up to 22 years/ – 46%, young adults /between 23 and 34/ – 31%, middle adults /35 to 60/ – 13% and late adults /over 60/ – 10%); educational level (university degree – 18%, university students – 21%, high school – 51%, comprehensive school – 5% and primary school – 5%) and a place of living (big city – 63%, small town – 27% and rural area – 10%). Division into four age groups was according to Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development [1]. The results were statistically analysed with $\chi^2$ test using Statistica ver 5.0.

Results

‘What are psychologists’ was the first question of the questionnaire. The answers are demonstrated in Fig. 1.

Over 53.7% of the respondents believe that psychologists help people. Far less participants, about 12.5%, are of the opinion that psychologists support people in distress. Additionally, 11.8% note that psychologists are well educated and know a lot about human psyche.

Next, 6% the respondents report that psychologists study behaviour whereas 5.9% of them argue psychologists treat mental disease. 5.1% of the subjects assume that psychologists solve problems while 2.2% claim that psychologists advise their clients.

The second question referred to what psychologists do. The obtained answers are in Fig. 2.

The most prevalent answers included: psychologists help people (30.4%), they deal with problems (24.6), they cure psychiatric disorders (24%), they advise their patients (10.8%). 4.1% of the respondents think that psychologists solve school problems while 2.7% of them do not know what psychologists do.

The third question related to the places where psychologists work. The responses to this question are presented in Fig. 3.
Numerous (38.1%) subjects are of the opinion that psychologists work in health service (hospitals, outpatient clinics etc.). 18.8% of the participants mention schools whereas 9.7% note that psychologists work in private practice. A little less of the respondents (8.8%) report that psychologists work in prisons or in army and police (4.0%) Other answers included: welfare (3.1%), public institutions (1.4%) and associations (1.1%).

The fourth question concerned the situations when psychologists are useful. The responses to this question are presented in Fig. 4.

42.9% of the participants of the study assume that psychologists are useful for people with personal problems whereas 30.8% of them claim that psychologists are useful in psychological crisis. 9.1% of the subjects mention school problems, 5.1% of them note addictions while only 4.5% of them believe psychologists are useful for people who need an advice. Roughly 3.5% of the subjects report mental disorders.

In the fifth question, the participants were asked to describe the characteristics of people who consult a psychologist. The responses to this question are presented in Fig. 5.

As far as the sixth question 'what do you think about psychologists?' is concerned, 53.1% of the respondents believe that psychologists are necessary for the society. 10.2% think that psychologists are effective as opposed to 8.2% who believe they are ineffective. 8.2% of the respondents argue that psychologists can be trusted while 5.1% of the subjects say that psychologists cannot be trusted. Additionally, 5.1% of the subjects claim that psychologists are expensive while 2% point to their good education in the field of psychology. 3.1% of the participants of the study did not answer this question or said that they did not know.

Next, the seventh question asked, 'When would you consult a psychologist?'. Responses to this question are presented in Fig. 7.

54.3% of the respondents believe they would do it if they had psychological problems. A smaller number of the participants (as many as 21.3%) argue that they would go to a psychologist if they were in a psychological crisis. 8.5% of the participants did not answer this question while 5.3% reported they do not need any psychological consultation. Notably, 4.3% of the participants reported they would consult a psychologist if their relatives forced them. 3.2% of the respondents would go to a psychologist for diagnosis (IQ tests, personality tests) whereas only 2.1% would visit a psychologist for therapy.
Figure 7. Responses to ‘When would you consult a psychologist?’. Rycina 7. Odpowiedzi badanych na pytanie: „W jakiej sytuacji zwróciłbyś się o pomoc do psychologa?”

Figure 8. Responses to ‘Have you or any of your friends/colleagues ever consulted a psychologist?’ Rycina 8. Odpowiedzi badanych na pytanie: „Czy ktoś z twoich znajomych zwrócił się o pomoc do psychologa?”

As far as the question ‘Have you or any of your friends/colleagues ever consulted a psychologist?’ is concerned, only 9.3% of the respondents consulted psychologists themselves or realised that someone in their surrounding had asked a psychologist for help. As many as 80.4% of the subjects report they had never contacted a psychologist an/or do not know if any of their relatives or friends ever contacted a psychologist as opposed to 2.8% of the respondents who say they either make friends or work with psychologists. The same number of respondents mentions that they consulted a psychologist because of problems with children. 1.9% mention a divorce while 0.9% say that they consulted a psychologist for rehabilitation Responses to this question are presented in Fig. 8.

The percentage exceeds 100 because of multiple responses subjects could give.

Discussion

In order to assess what the residents of the greater Poznań area know about the activity and professional interests of psychologists, the participants were asked to respond to eight questions concerning psychologists. A considerable number of the subjects report that psychologists work in schools and in health service. However, these answers do not correlate with the results of questions 5 and 7 (which referred to characteristics of people consulting psychologists and to the situations when the respondents would contact a psychologist, respectively). In this context, it appears that although psychologists are employed at schools, the respondents are not of the opinion that these professionals are useful in school problems.

Here, it might be worthwhile to add that psychologists play an important role in management of school problems in the West. School psychologists in Poland are underrated [2–3].

Moreover, this approach to the role of a psychologist at schools also resonates in administrative decisions caused by economic problems of the region. Recently, as the expenditure on psychological service at schools has been dramatically reduced, a number of psychologists have been made redundant while many work only part time, which is not enough. Pedagogues, who are not appropriately trained to take up a role of a psychologist, are replacing school psychologists. One should point to the latest reports, which bluntly depict increasing crime rate at schools and a growing number of drug addicts among school children.

Many respondents are of the opinion that psychologists work in health service. Yet, one may be surprised by the subjects’ responses to other questions. Only a few respondents mention causes, which would make them visit a hospital psychologist. Surprisingly, one can assume that a great deal of the respondents cannot tell the difference between a psychologist and a psychiatrist. Interestingly, 11% of the participants of the study believe that psychologists work in welfare. An In-depth analysis might suggest that the subjects cannot tell a psychologist from a social worker. Few respondents are of the opinion that one should visit a psychologist if they have suicidal thoughts or attempt suicide.

Few subjects note the role of psychology and psychologists in business and advertisement. One may expect that the public awareness of the mutual relationship of economics and psychology will grow due to economic changes, as it is observed in other countries [2–5].

Additionally, χ² was used to analyse the relationship between each answer and respondents’ age, gender, level of education but no statistically significant differences could be found. Bearing this in mind, one may suppose that the respondents use only one source of information about the function of a psychologist, such as TV. Thus, as the study shows, our respondents’ knowledge about the subject in question is scarce despite a growing public demand for psychologists. One may hope that the demand for psychologists’ service will lead to a change, as it was in the case of the profession of a social worker. As Tarkowska [6] and Kawczyńska-Butrym [7] suggest, social worker is another profession of help and nurture.
This profession has evolved much after 1989. After the transformation, together with increasing unemployment rate, social workers became visible. Now most people are able to answer correctly the questions about the nature of social workers’ job.

Key concluding points:
1. The role of psychologist in the Polish society is understood very superficially. They are often mistaken for psychiatrists or social workers.
2. Their work, especially in schools and hospitals, is underrated.
3. One may suppose that mass media, particularly TV and Internet, are the main source of information about psychology for Poles.

References

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