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COUNSELORS OF SUMMER CAMPS FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS – BETWEEN EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY

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Wychowawca zorganizowanego wypoczynku dzieci i młodzieży – pomiędzy oczekiwaniami a rzeczywistością

Streszczenie

Bezpieczne i rozwijające uczestników kolonie letnie w dużej mierze zależą od kompetencji wychowawców, którzy odgrywają kluczową rolę w kształtowaniu wzorów zachowań w czasie wolnym. Powinni oni więc mieć odpowiednią wiedzę, doświadczenie i umiejętności. Dlatego za cel badań przyjęto rozpoznanie motywów skłaniających do podjęcia tej pracy, a także opinii wychowawców zorganizowanego wypoczynku na temat tego zawodu oraz warunków ich pracy.

W badaniu ankietowym wzięło udział 175 wychowawców wypoczynku. Większość ankietowanych (86%) to kobiety; 34% stanowili czynni nauczyciele, a 23% to instruktorzy harcerscy. Wyniki opracowano z wykorzystaniem statystyki opisowej oraz testu niezależności chi-kwadrat Pearsona.

Najważniejszy motyw skłaniający do wykonywania zawodu wychowawcy kolonijnego (88% wskazań) to możliwość pracy z dziećmi i młodzieżą. Wybierając miejsce pracy, badani kierują się wysokością zarobków (42%), jednak większość respondentów (70%) nie jest zadowolona z otrzymywanego wynagrodzenia; 91% badanych ukończyło kurs wychowawców wypoczynku, a 66% uważa, że kurs niewystarczająco przygotowuje do pracy w tym zawodzie.

Na podstawie uzyskanych danych można stwierdzić, że kurs na wychowawcę wypoczynku nie przygotowuje w pełni do pracy na kolonii. Należałoby rozważyć wprowadzenie obowiązkowych praktyk przed podjęciem pracy w pełnym zakresie obowiązków. Praca wychowawcy wypoczynku

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jest odpowiedzialną profesją, która nie jest wynagradzana adekwatnie do pełnionych obowiązków i odpowiedzialności.

Słowa kluczowe: kolonie letnie, turystyka dzieci i młodzieży, wychowawca kolonijny, kompetencje, wychowawcy.

Abstract

Counselors play a key role in fostering positive behaviors and organizing leisure activities, and they should have the required experience and knowledge for working with minors. Therefore, this study was undertaken to identify counselors' motives for working at summer camps, and to elicit counselors' opinions about their profession and work environment.

The study involved a survey of 175 summer camp counselors. The vast majority of the participants (86%) were women; 34% were professionally active teachers, and 23% were Polish Scouts instructors. The results of the survey were analyzed with the use of descriptive statistics, and Pearson's chi-squared test of independence.

88% of the respondents took summer camp jobs because they enjoyed working with children. Remuneration was a critical factor in the choice of specific job offers (42%), but 70% were not satisfied with the offered wages; 91% of the respondents had completed training courses for camp counselors, but 66% were of the opinion that training does not adequately prepare counselors for the job.

Training courses do not thoroughly prepare counselors for working with underage campers. Therefore, obligatory training or internship opportunities for entry-level camp counselors should be considered. Counseling work is a demanding profession, but the offered wages are not proportional to camp counselor's duties and responsibilities.

Keywords: summer camps, children and adolescent tourism, summer camp educator, competence, counselors.

Introduction

Millions of children from various parts of the world have been attending summer camps for 150 years (Henderson et al., 2007; Walton & Tothy, 2011; Dallari & Mariotti 2016). This is one of the reasons why tourist services for children and youth are an important segment of the tourism industry. Various types of organized recreation for children and adolescents are offered to cater for the parents' and the children's needs. For many years, summer camps have been the most popular type of seasonal recreation for children (Majewska & Dłużewska, 2015). The first summer camp for 60 children residing in Zurich was organized by a Swiss pastor in 1876 (Kula, 1994).

In Poland, organized recreation for children and adolescents is supervised by the Minister of National Education and the Board of Education (Ziółkowski, 2015), and it is defined as organized leisure activities for children and adolescents that promote recreation, physical and mental regeneration, involve training or learning, development of interests, skills and social competencies in chil-

dren and adolescents, and take place continuously over a period of minimum two days during summer and winter school holidays, spring and winter public holidays, in Poland or abroad, in particular in the form of residential and non-residential camps, winter camps, scouting camps, and camping trips (Dz. U. [The Journal of Polish Law] 2021, item 1082, Dz. U. 2022, item 655). Therefore, summer camps are out-of-school-time settings that provide programs during the summer for three or more days, may involve structured and unstructured activities with specific purposes or goals, and are supervised by adults (Henderson et al., 2007; Lubowiecki-Vikuk & Paczyńska-Jędrych 2010). At the same time, child camps have often been used as a tool to enable children to practice sports, improve their physical literacy and encourage healthy lifestyles, and they also create employment opportunities for physical education teachers (Sousa et al., 2022).

Camp educators and counselors are largely responsible for ensuring that organized recreation is safe, interesting and engaging for the participants. To guarantee that scheduled activities are safe and implemented according to the program, camp organizers should employ qualified staff (Mroczek-Żulicka, 2018), including a camp manager and educators, as well as coaches and sports, recreation, culture, education, and foreign language instructors, depending on the type of the program (Dz.U. 2021, poz. 1082, Dz.U. 2022, poz. 655).

A career in the tourism sector requires both tourism-related competencies and social skills (Winiarski & Zdebski, 2008). The above also applies to summer camp counselors. Each year, millions of people around the world are employed as camp counselors and educators. In the United States alone, each year, more than 1.5 million people, mostly emerging adults, find employment in camps, primarily to staff their summer seasonal programs (Richmont et al., 2020). The staff of seasonal summer camps are individuals who provide programs and services for camp participants only during the summer and in a temporary capacity (Warner et al., 2021). A camp counselor is someone who guides and ensures the safety of children as they engage in camp activities. Counselors assist with activity planning and receive special training to fully support children's needs during their stay at the camp. They play a key role in fostering positive behaviors and organizing leisure activities, which is why counselors should have the required experience and knowledge for conducting scouting and recreational activities for campers (Mroczek-Żulicka, 2028).

In Poland, camp counselors must be older than 18, must have at least secondary education, a clear criminal record, and must complete training for recreational instructors (Dz. U. 2021, item 1082, Dz. U. 2022, item 655). The training requirement does not apply to candidates who are Polish Scouts instructors, teachers, and individuals who work with children in care and educational facilities. In the United States, counselors for residential camps are typically older teens and college-age adults (early 20s) because this type of work is temporary, seasonal and low-paying.

The camp provides youngsters with similar-age role models who are different from teachers in a traditional school. Therefore, counselors are perceived as “big brothers/sisters” who create a positive mentoring environment (Lynch, 2009).

It should be noted that counselors working in summer camps are burdened with huge responsibility not only for the activity program, but above all, for the safety of underage campers. Work in a residential summer camp is a complex 24-hour job, and the counselors are tasked with teaching and supervising campers and taking on similar responsibilities to the parents (Lynch, 2009). However, job perception and job satisfaction among camp counselors have never been studied from the employees’ point of view. Therefore, the aim of this study was to identify counselors’ motives for working at summer camps, to describe the specific features of the job, and to elicit counselors’ opinions about their profession and work environment.

Materials and methods

The study involved a survey of 175 respondents with work experience as summer camp counselors. The survey questionnaire was developed by the authors, and it consisted of a demographic part with questions about the respondents’ socioeconomic status (place of residence, education, self-assessment of financial status), as well as open-ended and closed-ended questions concerning job perception and job satisfaction among the respondents. The survey was voluntary and anonymous. The results were processed statistically in MS Excel 365 and Statistica v. 13. The presence of significant associations between nominal variables was determined by Pearson’s chi-squared test of independence with a minimum sample size of five observations and a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$.

The vast majority of the respondents (86%) were women. In the United States, the gender issue is also evident in the summer camp industry, where 62% of summer staff positions in 2018 were held by women [12]. The respondents were divided into the following age groups: 21-25 (40%), 31-40 (20%), 26-30 (13%), 18-20 (11%), and 41-50 (11%). Only 5% of the respondents were older than 50. More than half of the participants (66%) had secondary education, which can be largely attributed to the fact that 51% of the respondents were under 25. The remaining participants had university education. Most respondents were employed (59.0%), whereas university or secondary school students accounted for 37.0% of the surveyed population. Unemployed respondents (2%) and old-age pensioners (2%) were the smallest groups in the analyzed population. More than half of the participants (55%) described their financial status as good (55%), 32% - as average, 11% - as very good, and 2.0% - as poor. The vast majority of the respondents were urban residents, and 57% of urban dwellers

resided in large cities with a population above 100,000, 13% resided in cities with a population of up to 50,000, and 11% resided in cities with a population of 50,000 to 100,000. The remaining participants (19%) were rural residents.

The statistical analysis did not reveal significant associations between variables. Only the relationship between the respondents' age and wage satisfaction was at the threshold of statistical significance ($p=0.054$).

Results

Table 1

Professional qualifications and experience of working as a summer camp counselor, N=175

Degree in education	Number of responses (N=175)	Percentage of responses
Yes	63	36.00
No	96	55.00
Yes, but I am not employed in education	18	9.00
Are you a certified Polish Scouts instructor?		
Yes	29	16.00
No	134	77.00
Yes, but I am not actively involved in scouting work	12	7.00
Have you completed any of the following courses to improve your professional qualifications?*		
Camp counseling	160	91.00
First aid	115	66.00
Recreational management	74	42.00
Activity leader	67	38.00
Sailing certification	21	12.00
Recreational sports instructor	18	10.00
Life guard	14	8.00
None	13	7.00
Other courses	13	7.00
Do training courses for camp counselors prepare them for the job?*		
Yes	64	40.00
No	96	60.00
Years of experience as a summer camp counselor		
1 – 4	80	45.00
>10	40	23.00
5 – 9	36	21.00
First season	19	11.00

Table 1

Professional qualifications and experience of working... (cont.)

Degree in education	Number of responses (N=175)	Percentage of responses
Number of camps worked per season		
Two – three	95	54.00
Four – five	37	21.00
One	22	13.00
Six and more	21	12.00

Source: author's own data.

* The percentage of responses does not sum up to 100 because the respondents could select more than one answer.

** N=160 because this question was answered only by respondents who had completed a training course for camp counselors.

A third of the respondents were professionally active teachers, whereas Polish Scouts instructors accounted for 25% of the surveyed population. In the studied group, 91% of the participants had completed training courses for camp counselors, but 60% of them were of the opinion that training does not sufficiently prepare the candidates for the job. In the examined population, 42% had completed training courses in recreational management, 66% had completed first aid training, 38% had completed training courses for activity leaders, 10% had sailing certificates, 9% had completed training courses of recreational sports instructors, and 8% were certified life guards. The respondents had also completed training courses for fitness instructors, swimming instructors, dance instructors, role-playing game instructors, and child therapists. The respondents who had not completed any training courses considered their education as sufficient competence. Most participants had worked as camp counselors for more than one season, whereas 11% of the respondents had just begun their first season as camp counselors. More than 50% of the participants had worked in two to three camps per season, 13% - one camp per season, 21% - four to five camps per season, and the remaining respondents had worked in six and more camps per season.

Most respondents were motivated to become camp counselors because they enjoyed working with children and adolescents. Seasonal employment was the second most important motive. Most of the surveyed subjects searched for work opportunities on the Internet, including social media such as Facebook and job search sites. The remaining participants were recommended for the job, received job offers from camp organizers, or applied with travel agencies. Remuneration was the key factor determining the respondents' choice of employment offers. Despite the above, most participants were not satisfied with the offered pay.

Table 2
Motivation for working as a camp counselor, remuneration, N=175

	Number of responses (N=175)	Percentage of responses
Motivation for working as a camp counselor*		
I enjoy working with children and adolescents	143	88.00
Seasonal employment (during summer holidays for university students and teachers)	124	71.00
Travel opportunities	105	60.00
Other	22	13.00
Student training	6	3.00
How do you search for work?		
On Facebook groups	66	38.00
I was recommended for the job	49	28.00
I receive job offers from camp organizers	27	15.00
I apply with camp organizers	17	10.00
Various websites	10	6.00
NGOs	6	3.00
Factors that determine the choice of employment offers		
Remuneration	72	42.00
Camp program/profile	33	19.00
Date	27	15.00
Location	27	15.00
Type of recreation	16	9.00
Are wages proportional to camp counselors' duties?		
Yes	52	30.00
No	123	70.00

Source: author's own data.

* The percentage of responses does not sum up to 100 because the respondents could select more than one answer.

In the surveyed population, 53% of the respondents shared camp activities equally with instructors, whereas 42% conducted all activities independently. In most cases, camp curricula were provided by the organizer, but only 11% of the respondents had to strictly follow the activity program. The vast majority of the surveyed counselors had access to art and craft supplies and sports and recreational equipment for conducting camp activities.

Table 3
Camp counselors’ duties, camp organization, and participant satisfaction (N=175)

	Number of responses (N=175)	Percentage of responses
Camp counselors’ duties		
I conduct all camp activities on my own	74	42.00
I share all camp activities equally with instructors/activity leaders	92	53.00
Activities are conducted by instructors/activity leaders	9	5.00
Camp curriculum		
The camp curriculum is provided by the organizer, but counselors can select and organize activities at their discretion (based on the curriculum)	97	55.00
The camp curriculum is not provided by the organizer and has to be developed by the counselor	59	34.00
Counselors have to strictly follow the curriculum provided by the organizer	19	11.00
Availability of art and craft supplies (crayons, paint, paper, modeling clay, etc.)		
Fully available	110	63.00
Limited availability	61	35.00
Not available	4	2.00
Availability of sports and recreational equipment (balls, badminton sets, jumping ropes, etc.)		
Fully available	124	71.00
Limited availability	48	27.00
Not available	3	2.00
Quality of the camp program and participant satisfaction		
The camp program is interesting, and the participants are satisfied	136	78.00
The camp program is not interesting, and the participants are not satisfied	24	14.00
Other / Depends	15	8.00

Source: author’s own data.

Discussion

In recent years, the Internet has emerged as the leading source of information and a digital job board. Most of the surveyed participants also searched for employment opportunities in summer camps on the Internet (Table 2). The respondents had certain expectations regarding potential employment, but they also had to comply with the employer's requirements. Employers communicate through formal and informal channels to provide important information, such as the company's expectations, organizational culture, and prestige (Connelly et al., 2011). Above all, persons applying for summer camp jobs are expected to possess social-emotional learning (SEL) skills programs (Richmont et al., 2020). During staff recruitment, most camp organizers focus on SEL competencies such as communication skills, problem-solving skills, ability to work in a team, initiative and perseverance, a strong work ethic, leadership, and adaptability (Hodge & Lear, 2011). According to research, employers screen the applicants based on their education, job experience, and internships to determine whether they have the required skills and knowledge (Gault et al., 2010; Helyer & Lee, 2014). Considerable attention is paid to the candidates' educational background and experience in the field. It should be noted that the majority of the surveyed subjects met the requirements relating to educational background and professional experience. Most respondents had secondary education (mostly university students), and the remaining participants were university graduates (Table 1). A large percentage of the surveyed counselors were professionally active teachers. Some respondents were certified Polish Scouts instructors. A survey involving the employees of travel agencies that organize summer camps revealed that teachers and certified instructors are prioritized during recruitment.

In the studied population, 90% of the respondents had completed training courses for leisure educators, despite the fact that teachers and Polish Scouts instructors (who accounted for a large part of the surveyed sample) had already had the required qualifications. The above could indicate that camp counselors are professionals who recognize the need to improve their qualifications. It is also possible that some respondents had participated in training courses before completing their formal education. Despite the above, most participants were of the opinion that counseling courses do not sufficiently prepare the candidates for working with children in summer camps. In the comments section, the respondents argued that camp counselors are not suitably prepared and lack the tools for working with youngsters, and that course certificates are merely documents that pave the path to employment. The respondents also wrote, "A training course will never fully prepare you for work, and experience has to be gained independently," "All staff members should participate in practical training pro-

grams before their first camp season,” and “Paid practical training/internship should be obligatory to ensure that all camp counselors are suitably prepared to work with children and adolescents.” According to most respondents, practical training should be obligatory for all persons aspiring to become camp counselors.

Most participants had attended other courses to acquire skills and qualifications that might be useful during camp work. They participated in training courses for recreational managers, activity leaders, first aid courses, and training courses for recreational sports instructors. Richmond et al. (2020) also found that 61.3% of the surveyed camp counselors participated in counselor-in-training (CIT), leader-in-training (LIT), or similar programs before they worked as seasonal camp staff.

According to Allen et al. (2010) when employers invest in training, staff may feel that they are valued. When training leads to advancement, employees may be more motivated to stay in an organization, as long as the available job opportunities align with personal goals. Therefore, summer camp organizers should enable potential employees to attend training courses and, preferably, practical training or internships, especially since employment in a summer camp is an entry-level job for 10% of the applicants. Research has shown that camp counseling is often the first job for applicants in the USA (Lynch, 2019). However, most of the respondents surveyed in the present study appeared to be highly qualified, both theoretically and practically, to work with children and adolescents because they had worked in summer camps for more than five seasons, and the vast majority had worked as counselors during more than two camps per season.

Psychological factors play an important role in motivating counselors who are emerging adults and are entering the workforce for the first time (Lynch, 2019). In the current study, most participants took summer camp jobs because they enjoyed working with children and adolescents. A similar percentage of the respondents regarded camp employment as an additional source of income in the summer season, which is supported by the fact that remuneration was a critical factor in the choice of specific job offers. However, most camp counselors were not satisfied with the offered wages. In the comments section, the respondents argued that “The offered rates are usually not proportional to our duties and responsibilities,” “Camp counselors’ efforts are underappreciated, and the wages do not adequately reflect our responsibilities,” “The offered wages do not account for the fact that camp counseling is a 24/7 job,” and “As of this season, I decided to take fewer camp jobs and find better paid work elsewhere.” Similar observations were made in a study by Richmond et al. (2020), where more than 40% of the respondents argued that low pay was the main reason for staff turnover and the search for better-paying jobs. These findings clearly indicate that low wages are one of the key reasons why camp organizers lose employees. One of the respondents commented that “Low rates discourage

qualified educators from taking summer jobs. Nobody is willing to risk losing their professional license for such a small fee." This explains why each year before the summer season, camp organizers find it difficult to fill all vacancies. Similar problems have been encountered in other countries. In the United States, camp directors struggle to fill open seasonal positions each summer due to staff turnover and competing internships (Allen et al., 2010). According to the American Camp Association (Lynch, 2019), staff retention is the second major emerging issue facing the camp industry. Job impact and camp embeddedness were the primary reasons motivating seasonal camp staff to return, but that compensation, poor job fit, and other opportunities were likely drivers of turnover. As a result, many camp counselors lack the necessary experience and qualifications for working with children, and they are unaware of the responsibilities it entails. The respondents wrote, "The mean age of camp counselors is 21 years. Unfortunately, very young counselors lack the necessary experience and skills, and they are often unable to cope with real-life problems faced by children and teenagers," "Camp personnel are often too young and inexperienced; they do not have background knowledge in childhood education which is very helpful during camp work, and they often neglect their duties," "Young counselors often regard summer camps as private holidays, and they forget that their job is to keep campers safe and provide them with happy memories." These opinions validate the observation that practical training and internship should be obligatory for entry-level counselors. In the United States, competing internships and the sentiment that camp is not a 'real job' are the primary reasons for camp workforce shortages (Lynch, 2019). Therefore, it appears that camp organizers should invest in educators by following the example of travel agencies which cover the cost of training for tour guides. When employers invest in training, staff may feel that they are valued. When training leads to advancement, employees may be more motivated to stay in an organization, as long as the available job opportunities align with personal goals (Allen et al., 2010).

The camp curriculum, namely a scheduled activity program, is an important part of organized recreation. In the present study, only 5% of the respondents did not lead scheduled activities which were conducted by qualified instructors/leisure educators. Instructors are usually hired to conduct specific activities (e.g., sports or art) and do not directly take care of the colonists afterwards. The camp educator, does not have to participate in these activities (the colonists are taken care of by the instructor), which gives him time to have at least minimal rest.

More than half of the surveyed subjects shared all activities equally with other staff members. This approach follows the example of scout camps, where team leaders assume responsibility for selected activities. The remaining educators conducted all activities on their own. According to one of the respondents, "Camp organizers do not understand the difference between educators and in-

structors, and they expect counselors to lead all activities for children.” Counselors and educators are on duty round the clock and are also expected to lead recreational and scouting activities; therefore, their work is highly demanding and can lead to both physical and mental fatigue. Fatigue can influence employee performance, in particular when employees work consecutive long-hour shifts in the same week. Fatigue, defined as an overwhelming sense of tiredness, lack of energy, and a feeling of exhaustion associated with impaired physical and/or cognitive functioning, has been associated with changes in mood, cognitive problems, reduced motivation and job performance, physiological changes, and safety risks (Dubin et al., 2020). Fatigue associated with camp employment may also compromise employee performance, such as the failure to retain health and safety-related information learned during staff training (Barry, 2019). The duties of camp educators and instructors/activity leaders should be clearly separated to guarantee the safety of children as well as staff members. Ineffective organization and work overload can also discourage many counselors from applying for summer camp jobs.

According to most respondents, camp programs developed by the organizers are interesting for the participants. Most of the surveyed subjects had adequate access to supplies and sports and recreational equipment for conducting the scheduled activities. In most cases, the camp curriculum was provided by the organizer, but more than half of the respondents claimed that counselors were not expected to strictly follow the program. This solution appears to be reasonable because educators generally know which activities can be initiated in a given situation, and which should be modified. However, regardless of whether the camp curriculum is provided by the organizer, counselors and instructors are largely responsible for making the activities enjoyable for the participants. This observation is consistent with the findings of Omelan et al. (2018) who reported that the surveyed summer camp participants were more likely to give praise to instructors and activity leaders than the camp program. This view was shared by tour operators who argued that a simple field game coordinated by a charismatic instructor could be a much greater attraction than a ropes course in an adventure park.

Conclusions

The majority of the surveyed respondents took counseling jobs in summer camps because they enjoyed working with children and adolescents. However, counseling work is challenging, and it entails considerable responsibility. Counselors are not only expected to have the required qualifications, but they should also possess interpersonal skills, as well as physical and mental stamina to cope

with the job. Despite the above, the offered remuneration is not proportional to camp counselors' duties and responsibilities. In this study, low pay was regarded as the greatest weakness of summer camp work.

According to the respondents, training programs do not adequately prepare counselors for working with minors. As a result, many counselors are unable to find the best course of action in potentially dangerous situations, which can compromise the campers' safety. Therefore, obligatory practical training or internship opportunities for entry-level camp counselors should be considered to enable young counselors to better deal with their responsibilities.

STATEMENT OF ETHICS

This study was conducted in accordance with the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki. The study protocol has reviewed and approved by The Scientific Research Ethics Committee of the University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, Poland, No. 6/2018. All participants provided written informed consent to participate in this study.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Aneta Anna Omelan: Conceptualization, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review and Editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration.

Aleksandra Laskowska: Conceptualization, Investigation, Resources, Writing – Original Draft.

Anna Hakuć-Błażowska: Methodology, Software, Formal analysis, Data Curation, Visualization.

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