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EMPLOYEES' IMAGE AS A FACTOR OF THEIR
PROFESSIONAL SELF-DEFINITION

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Abstract

The article is devoted to the image problem in the penal system (PS). The image is presented as the “image of a PS employee”, which reflects, among other things, the professional experience gained in the PS. The assimilation of professional experience by a PS young employee (self-determination) allows to create their individual image. Analyzing several types of images (mirror, current, desired), the authors determine the leading components of each of these types. Having chosen the functional approach to the study of the image, the authors identified and compared the mirror image of a penal correction system employee (self-image); the current image (based on the estimates of the special contingent) and the desired image (an employee’s image as perceived by the people not related to the penal system itself). As a research methodology, a personal differential was used, on the basis of which it was possible to obtain a tripartite assessment of the PS officer, and then group them according to the three criteria, which eventually formed the image of a penal system employee - “personality assessment”, “strength” and “activity”. As a result, answers to two questions are given: 1) what is the perception of a PS employee by the special contingent and the general public? 2) what qualities should employees have in order for the PS to have a positive image in Russia as well as abroad? Significant differences in the characteristics of the current, mirror and desired image of a PS officer are shown.

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Keywords: Desired image, mirror image, professional self-definition, penal system, special contingent, current image.



1. Introduction

The English word "image" is used to denote an emotionally colored image of something that has developed in the mass consciousness of people and has the character of a stereotype (Dzhekins & Yadin, 2003). An image can be "bad" and "good". Moreover, "a better image can be earned if the reasons for the bad one, which may have resulted from inappropriate behavior or false information, are revealed" (Panasyuk, 2007).

Our study is based on a functional approach to the study of the image phenomenon. The multi-level structure of the image from the standpoint of the functional approach is represented by such types as mirror image (an image characterizing a person's self-image); current image (seen from an outside perspective and characterized by others); desired image (which the person himself seeks, and / or which is expected by others); corporate (the image of the organization itself) and the multiple one (Bankins, 2018; Dzhekins & Yadin, 2003).

The article will focus on the mirror, current and desired images of a PS employee. When these images are consistent among themselves, then we can conclude about the so-called confirmed image, or reputation – a good or a bad one. Then the image is a guide for professional self-determination.

It is worth noting that the image problem is intensively discussed in the scientific literature (Balzhinimaeva, Kombaev, & Tsyrempilova, 2018; Dhir, 2018; Dhir & Shukla, 2019; Santi & Gorghiu, 2016; Stan, 2017; Tsvetkov & Anufrieva, 2018). At the same time, the issues of the PS image have come into the attention of scientists not so long before, therefore the image of a PS employee as an integral part of the PS image problem has not been thoroughly studied yet. The relevance of its study is due, on the one hand, to the modernization of the penitentiary system in Russia, and, on the other hand, to the negative phenomena in its structural division staff. Therefore, this makes the need for the penal correctional system to increase public confidence in both the system itself and its employees acute (Tsvetkova & Kolesnikova, 2012; Lyapanov, 2014).

2. Problem Statement

Professional self-definition as the development of a young specialist's accumulated professional experience is multifactorial. In our opinion, one of the important factors of professional self-determination is the very image of the professional system in which the young specialist has to adapt. In this regard, it is necessary to identify the leading components of the image of the penitentiary system in order to verify conditions conducive to ensuring professional self-determination effectiveness and a PSEmployee's official activities.

3. Research Questions

In order to improve work with PS personnel, it is important to have scientific ideas describing how an employee is able to form respect for the law among the special contingent.

How do employees evaluate themselves?

What ideas do they have regarding their desired image?

What image components are the determinants in the process of the young PS employees' professional self-determination?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to identify significant differences in the characteristics of the image of a PS officer noted by the employees themselves (mirror image), special contingent (current image) and characteristics given by the general public as "random people" (current image) and to identify the desired image components.

5. Research Methods

For an empirical study, a sample of 270 people was determined including:

- 90 people – the PS employees (60 men and 30 women), aged from 22 to 50 (the average employees' age being 36), the level of education: higher education – 77 people, vocational – 12 people, general secondary – 1 person;
- 90 representatives of the PS special contingent – these are those registered in the penal inspections; suspects, accused and convicted, detained in remand centers; convicts serving sentences in penal colonies; 84 of them are men and 6 women aged 19 to 58 (the average age being 34 years old), 16 people had a higher education, 45 people – vocational college graduates, 27 people had a general secondary education and the remaining 2 had only primary education;
- 90 people – «random people» – men and women aged from 19 to 65 (the average age being 34 years old) who had no personal experience of involvement in this system, among whom 61 people had higher education, 25 are vocational college graduates and 4 people with general secondary education certificates.

The study was based on the assumption that there are significant differences in the characteristics of a PS officer's image noted by the employees (mirror image), special contingent (current image) and the characteristics given by the general public as "random people" (current image). However, the desired image of a PS officer is similar rather than different.

In order to test this hypothesis, we used the method of personal differential (PD), which allows us to study an individual's attitude to himself and to other people by assessing 21 pairs of the most common positive and negative personal qualities. The results obtained using the PD technique are then grouped according to three image criteria, namely: "personality assessment" (a person's acceptance and recognition of himself as a person, satisfaction with himself, his behavior), "strength" (which indicates a person's self-confidence in various situations), "activity" (a person's social involvement, impulsiveness and sociability).

6. Findings

The selected methods allowed to get answers to the two questions.

What characteristics dominate in the mirror and current image of a Russian PS employee? The answers are presented in the form of assessments (total points) of the characteristics of a PS employee's

current and mirror image. The second question as to what qualities PS employees should have in order for the system to have a positive image among the general public both here and abroad is represented by estimates (total points) of the characteristics of a PS officer's desired image.

The analysis of the respondents' answers to the first question reflects the following trends in the assessments of the real image (the maximum possible assessment with 90 respondents is 270 points):

- the rating of a PS employee's dominant characteristics based on the employees' assessments of themselves (mirror image) consists of 7 qualities: being confident (**170** - real image, 241 - desired image), conscientious (**159/244**), strong (**157/231**), energetic (**154/234**), fair (**153/232**), decisive (**152/230**), sociable (**150/184**); they are joined by such characteristics as being independent (**145/222**), active (**139/201**), honest (**137/222**), responsive (**121/183**), talkative (**120/145**), friendly (**115/179**), open-minded (**113/163**) and kind (**105/151**);
- the rating of a PS employee's dominant characteristics, compiled according to the estimates of the special contingent (current image), includes 6 qualities: being communicative (**111/150**), decisive (**110/176**), energetic (**106/175**), confident (**105/170**), fair (**103/196**) and active (**100/157**). Obviously, the assessments of a PS officer's dominant qualities submitted by the employees and the special contingent differ in total scores, but are generally consistent in key parameters – a PS employee is decisive, energetic, fair, confident, sociable and active. The two qualities - “conscientious” and “strong” - did not receive approval in the mirror image of a PS employee. It is likely that, in the eyes of the special contingent, real PS employees do not look as strong and conscientious as they consider themselves to be. But in general, it turns out that a PS officer's mirror and current image happened to be gravitating towards the essential personality features agreed upon in assessments.

The list of a PS officer's current image dominant characteristics, compiled from a survey of “random people,” includes 7 qualities: being strong (**202/240**), decisive (**155/230**), silent (**153/54**), confident (**144/225**), conscientious (**137/245**), independent (**135/216**) and stressed (**128/41**). The mismatch of the dominant characteristics of the mirror and the current image is revealed by two parameters - “talkative / silent” (employees consider themselves to be the first, but “random people” the second) and “stressed”. If employees distinguish such qualities as “honesty”, “responsiveness”, “friendliness”, “openness”, “kindness”, then the general public (“random people”) does not notice them.

The analysis of the respondents' answers to the second question permits to compile ratings of a PS officer's desired image dominant characteristics and compare them:

- the rating, compiled on the basis of the assessments done by the PS employees themselves, includes the following 8 qualities of the 21st pairs being evaluated: honest and independent, confident (170 - real image, **241** - desired image), conscientious (159/**244**), strong (157/**231**), energetic (154/**234**), fair (153/**232**), decisive (152/**230**), sociable (150/**184**); independent (145/**222**), honest (137/**222**);

- rating based on the assessments by the special contingent: conscientious (96/202);fair (103/196);strong (94/186);independent (92/182);honest (84/181);decisive (110/176);energetic (106/175);
- rating based on the assessments of “random people”: conscientious (137/245);strong (202/240);fair (94/233), honest (71/233);decisive (155/230);confident (144/225);independent (135/216);active (111/209).

The results obtained by the PD method, when answering the first question, are presented in Figure 01 (assessment of a PS officer’s personality, strength and activity, the maximum ratings range from +21 to -21; with 17-21 points corresponding to a high level; 8-16 - average level; 7 or less points - low level).

The highest appreciation to PS employees as individuals is put by the employees themselves (mirror image - 7.9 points);respondents from among the special contingent lower it by half, and “random people” - by more than 8 times! This result puzzles and provokes the assumption that the society has developed a disdainful attitude towards the PS staff (in the eyes of “random people”, the personality of a PS employee has a positive assessment, but it is related to a low level of the expression of characteristics - 0.9 points, i.e. "low value person").

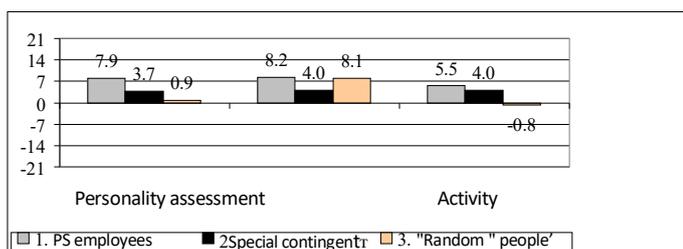


Figure 01. A PS officer’s mirror and current image according to the criteria: “personality assessment”, “strength”, “activity”

Paradoxically as it may seem, according to the “strength” criterion, the estimates of the employees themselves and “random people” practically coincide and are at the level of average values; however, the special contingent does not share this solidarity and estimates a PS officer’s strength almost half as low. The low assessment of a PS employee’s strength given by the special contingent, which is inconsistent with the assessment of the employees themselves, can be justified by the expectations of the special contingent to come across PS employees’ manifestations of hardness and rigidity in behavior, while the latter are growing dependent on external circumstances.

Equally paradoxical are tripartite assessments of a PS employee’s activity: the employees themselves evaluate it, although not very high, but positively and clearly higher than the special contingent, but in a completely different way than “random people” whose assessment is negative (-0.8 points) and, in fact, it can mean the depreciation of the social significance of the PS work. Obviously, according to the activity criterion, the image of a PS employee needs to be upgraded no less than by the criterion of "personal assessment".

Obviously, a PS officer’s desired image (second question) is agreed upon according to the six dominant characteristics: being conscientious, fair, strong, decisive, honest and independent.

We find close to agreement such characteristics of a PS employee’s desired image as being confident (this quality seems less valuable to the special contingent), energetic (this trait is somewhat underestimated by “random people”), active (slightly lower ratings from the PS staff and special contingent than the ones of “random people”, which did not allow this trait to get into the rating of the agreed dominant characteristics).

The two qualities that tend to join the dominant ones - “responsive” and “unperturbed” provoke further discussion: the special contingent and the employees themselves give a “desired” PS employee a significantly higher degree of responsiveness (183 — the assessment of employees and 169 — the one of the special contingent) and lower level of equanimity (167 -staff assessment and 143 —the special contingent’s one), however, “random people” believe that the equanimity of a PS officer (201) is a much more valuable characteristic of his personality than responsiveness (149).

The results obtained by grouping the estimates given by the PS employees themselves, the special contingent and “random people” according to the three criteria of a PS employee’s desired image, namely “personality assessment”, “strength” and “activity”, are presented in Figure 2.

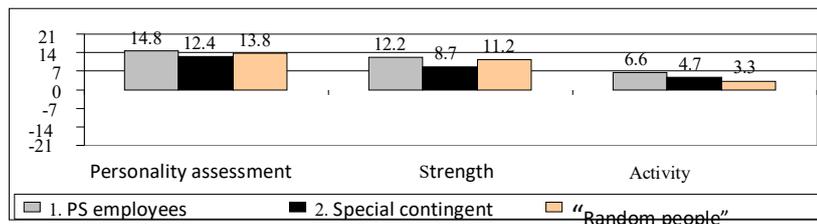


Figure 02. A PS employee’s desired image according to the criteria: “personality assessment”, “strength”, “activity” (PS employees, Special contingent, ‘Random people’)

One fundamentally important trend is worth mentioning - all three groups of respondents agree that a PS officer should rather have higher marks on the “personality” criterion than on the other two criteria - “strength” and “activity”. It should be noted that in a PS employee’s mirror and current images compiled according to these three criteria “power” leads (Figure 1).

The empirical data presented for the first time made it possible to substantiate the features of a PS officer’s image.

7. Conclusion

The presented results of the study reflect several trends: 1) all three expert groups consider it necessary to improve a PS officer’s image according to all the three criteria; 2) PS employees want their image to be more positive and noticeable, especially according to the criteria of “personality assessment” and “strength”; 3) the general public (“random people”) expects from PS employees much more activity than they are now displaying, and the employees themselves believe that in order to have a positive image in the country and abroad, they need to double their activity compared to public expectations.

Thus, the results of the study allow us to confirm that significant differences in the characteristics of a PS officer's current and mirror images exist, but their desired image, from the point of view of the three parties, although it requires a significant increase in all three criteria - "personality assessment", "strength" and "activity", but still has 6 agreed dominant characteristics –being conscientious, fair, strong, decisive, honest and independent.

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