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## **The psychological-pedagogical counselling centre and its multiple meanings**

Space and place, as well as the meanings invested in them, have recently been attracting increasingly more attention in thinking on education. In people's experiences, expectations and attitudes, spaces turn into places which have senses and meanings attributed to them. This article continues the counselling examination of the psychological-pedagogical counselling centre as a place where various practices unfold and are made sense of. I look into the physical location of the centre as a setting in which two subjects of the interaction engage in learning, thereby focusing in particular on the learning of parents in their relationship with the counsellor. Both research and everyday observations imply that counselling performed at the centre not only entails candid and spontaneous help and guidance-provision but also serves as a site and an "instrument" of segregation, labelling and manipulation – a space of ambiguity of counselling intervention. Managing the centre in conformity to procedures in force and the asymmetry of relations in the counselling situation evidence the impact of power, which help-seekers tend to perceive and interpret in a variety of ways. Undoubtedly, the centre is also counsellors' workplace, in which magic and reality interweave. The location and the space of the psychological-pedagogical counselling centre determine both the quality and the prestige of the locus of help-provision. They determine also its relevance as an element of the educational setting co-created by the counsellors and the help-users. This article is an attempt to analyse selected aspect of the space and place of the centre in a mid-sized town.

**Keywords:** counselling centre, *place*, segregation, labelling, power, learning, magic

### **Space and place**

This article is inspired by the concept of "the pedagogy of place" developed by Maria Mendel (2006). The concept has greatly influenced research into new meanings and revised understandings of *place*, which highlights the significance of place in everyday life. Admittedly, place and space are rather frequently used terms, but as they tend to be conflated, further clarification is in order. As defined by Yi-Fu Tuan, space is impersonal; it is a neutral ensemble of events, objects and dimensions. When invested with meanings by a human being, space turn into a place

permeated with life and essence (Tuan, 1987, in: Nalaskowski, 2002, p. 11).<sup>1</sup> Tuan refers to space as freedom and to a place as security, emphasising our attachment to a place and our longing for freedom (*Ibid.*, p.13). Jerome Bruner states that place is “not simply a piece of geography... It is an intricate construct, whose language dominates the thought of ...narrators” (Bruner, 2004, p. 703).

In a rapidly changing world, the concept of place becomes particularly important and is understood, paradoxically, as a relatively permanent value and, at the same time, a value constantly (re-)produced through sensing and attribution of meanings. It is also conceptualised as a source of inspiration and creation as well as a factor in education and socialisation. That place is analysed in diverse contexts of life indicates that it stands in a relation to the human being who invests it with sense and meaning. Therefore, education and counselling should be considered in conjunction with the place where they come to pass, particularly as featuring in the expectations, perceptions and experiences of the parties involved. This makes it possible to better understand counselling and educational phenomena, their conditions, interactions and potentials as well as the factors affecting their effectiveness.

Space and place as related to education have been studied by sociologists (Meighan, 1993, Hall, 1978), psychologists (Bańka, 2006) and educators (Mendel [ed.], 2006; Nalaskowski, 2002; Siarkiewicz, 2010; Skałbania, 2012). In the context of counselling, these issues have been comprehensively examined by Elżbieta Siarkiewicz (2002, pp. 95-105; Siarkiewicz 2004, pp. 15-45; Siarkiewicz 2010). In this article, by focusing on space and place, I seek to define and understand how place is involved in help-provision performed by psychological-pedagogical counselling centres. In doing this, I draw on Mendel’s tenet that “the place is always meaningful” (2006, p. 21). My argument starts from analysing the location of the counselling centre in the town and its social dimension. Then, I focus on selected issues concerning the counselling centre as a place of learning, a place of ambivalent – sometimes “magical” interventions, a place of power and a workplace.

### **The counselling centre: Location and social meaning**

Psychological-pedagogical counselling centres are situated in a variety of locations: in the town centre, on the outskirts, across its districts. Where they are actually set up tends to be a matter of coincidence, depending on the availability of premises as they are usually housed in buildings that originally served other purposes and have been turned into help-provision facilities upon necessary adaptation. Refurbishing

<sup>1</sup> The very notion of “meaning” is explained linguistically and philosophically. *The meaning of a word* and *the meaning of a place* are expressions which imply an individual perception and/or reception of the content of the utterance or certain elements of the surroundings, which is mediated by the senses. In this article “meaning” is nearly synonymous with significance, sense, content and role of the place – the pedagogical-psychological counselling centre I have studied (Skałbania, 2012).

and conversion have improved the general conditions in which the town's counselling centres operate by adjusting them to the needs of the disabled children and youth. Unfortunately, the current locations of the centres are inadequate to the particular needs of schools or families coping with increased social, educational or child-rearing problems (in the town I know, two big housing estates have had their psychological-pedagogical counselling centres closed down). In physical terms, the place is associated with a building whose location, equipment and even furnishing have been decided by the local government and education administration without genuinely considering the staff's needs. The central management is patent in the arrangement of the centres' interiors – even though they are differently located in the urban space, they all have a very similar layout of offices, passages and communication routes. It is no use looking for ingenuity, originality and uniqueness in them. Trying to find openness to changes and social needs in them is an equally futile venture. Given this, even though the psychological-pedagogical counselling centre is supposed to be an educational institution which provides services for families and schools, its architectural design results from the availability of office space rather than from social needs. Consequently, the counselling centres lack spacious rooms for group therapy, training and conference sessions, sensory integration therapy and joint parents-children meetings. The centres tend to have administration offices, small specialist studies and an area in which to wait for the scheduled visit, sometimes called a waiting room.

Upon entering the counselling centre physically and mentally, help-seekers go through various emotions. All counselling centres invariably have a reception desk, where the help-provision process starts and ends (registration and issuance of opinions/certificates). An equally important place is a waiting room – usually a makeshift affair in the hall for people waiting for admission. It is arranged by the centre's staff, who view their counselling and helping interventions as extending into it, which is indicated by it being littered with leaflets, brochures for parents and posters which inform about various educational and prevention campaigns or supportive measures for children and families. Unfortunately, waiting rooms are not always child- and parent-friendly. Usually small, dark and poorly or carelessly furnished, they sometimes evoke fear or even a sense of guilt. Similarly, the counsellors' offices usually have an imposing desk placed in the centre as an essential element of furnishing – an attribute of knowledge and power. Cramped, colourless and conventionally furnished places are more likely to be associated with compulsion and administrative procedures than with a friendly place of kindness, understanding and respect for the advice-seekers and their individual needs. It seems that those responsible are oblivious to the fact that the location, arrangement and furnishing of the counselling centre are important factors which often determine the effectiveness of help-provision. A visit at the counselling centre is supposed to produce pleasant memories of the place and the helpful, kind person consulted there rather than evoke an unpleasant obligation or coercion. This, however, also seems to have been forgotten.

## Counselling centre as a learning place

In classic psychological terms, the learning process is understood as “the experience-based development by an individual of relatively permanent changes in behaviour” (Włodarski, 1997, p. 860). According to the current andragogical theories, learning means not only obtaining knowledge and skills, but also developing personal and social skills (Kurantowicz, 2010, p. 5) thorough participation in a wider community throughout one’s lifetime. As far as the counselling centre is concerned, two learning groups can be distinguished: minors (children and the youth) and adults (parents and teachers).

In this article I address the learning of adults who themselves choose to use counsellors’ help and, thus, participate to a degree in the centre’s everyday operations as recipients of the counselling it provides. It represents the andragogical model of learning which, as Malcolm S. Knowles (2009) observes, differs from the pedagogical model targeting children. The difference, among other things, lies in that the former is associated with adults’ extensive experience and is largely based on inner motivation and self-diagnosing of needs (Knowles, 2009). This pertains also to learning at the counselling centre, even though consulting a specialist is sometimes enforced rather than self-chosen. The parent’s (adult’s) learning process unfolds in various circumstances: when preparing for a visit at the counselling centre (gathering information, inner mobilisation), during the visit (obtaining professional guidance and suggestions, conversations with other parents, perusal of the literature, scrutinising the interior furnishings) as well as while exchanging opinions and/or reflectively working through problems with the counsellor. The decision to seek professional help reflects the inner motivation to change the current situation. It is prompted by accumulated prior negative experience with the child’s school- or family-related problems and by attempts to understand *why the child has difficulties, why it does not meet school expectations and why it actually behaves the way it does*.

In the parent-counsellor relationship, “the didactic work” follows a certain model, determined, among other things, by the counsellor’s knowledge of therapeutic and counselling methodology, the institution’s regulations, specific observance of ethical principles and the situational context. Despite the general similarities, the ways in which the counsellor (Wojtasik, 1993, 1994) and the advice-seeker work to attain their goals may differ considerably, just like various ways of adult learning and teaching do.

Mieczysław Malewski (2001) distinguishes three models of didactic work with adults, referring to them as *technological*, *humanistic* and *critical* and emphasising that they may coalesce in practice.<sup>2</sup> In the technological model, the teacher is

<sup>2</sup> For an interesting view on the issue, see Adrianna Nizińska, “Modele uczenia się przez całe życie, Przegląd i analiza wybranych aspektów” (“Models of lifelong learning – overview and analysis of selected aspects”) at [www.silverteam.dobrekadry.pl](http://www.silverteam.dobrekadry.pl) (retrieved: 12 August 2013).

a dominant figure – an expert and a manager of the learning process. In the humanistic model, learning ensues from the adults' needs, will to act and explore and experience, which forms the educational potential. The critical model promotes education aimed at the participants' improving their quality of life. This model encourages the learners to work on their identities as interwoven with their individual biographies.

Interventions launched at the psychological-pedagogical counselling centre build on all the three models of educational work with adults and frequently blend them (cf. Skalbania, 2012, pp. 133-161). As diagnostic measures prevail over preventive and therapeutic ones, the adults often engage in a formal relationship with the counsellor, from whom they receive advice, guidelines, knowledge and information on the child and instructions on how to work with it further. In the technological model, the educational component of the meetings comprises the counsellor's passing on and discussing test results (recommendations). In such circumstances, the adults learn about things and obtain information, guided by the counsellor.

The humanistic model of educational work is applied in activities other than the diagnosis: psycho-educational activities, workshops and therapeutic sessions targeted at parents or teachers, if needed or expected. Their individual life experiences make for an inspiration and the educational potential in the learning process, with the counsellor-consultant as a co-participant. In this respect, the counselling centre's practices include educational skills training, communication workshops and preventive programmes proposed by the parents.

By definition, critical education is aimed at improving the quality of life and, in this sense, the educational process fosters self-identity development. Education of this kind is to be found in the parent/teacher-psychologist relation, and it tends to resemble psychotherapy and social work rather than counselling provision/reception. It involves learning from one's own biography. Socially speaking, biographical learning – as Peter Alheit (2002) insists – is always associated with an institution. Such models of educational work are applied in counselling centres for adults and specialised counselling facilities for addicts and individuals affected by or at risk of pathology. At the psychological-pedagogical counselling centre, the improvement of the quality of life is patently sought in interventions targeting the parents of disabled children. Participating in support or self-help groups, they are encouraged to analyse their own biographies, evaluate the critical events and practise self-evaluation as well as assessment of their achievements in working with the child. This enhances their confidence in the feasibility of constructing a better future and a new identity.

Clearly, the counselling centre as a place of learning creates opportunities for varied and extensive educational interventions. It is a meeting place for people with various needs and expectations. These people attribute diverse meanings and senses to the counselling centre conceived as a place. The physical behaviours, such as the child's diagnostic examination, informal conversations, consultations, participation

in workshops and support/self-help groups and training sessions, occur at a place that produces different emotions and experiences for different people, who invest it with different meanings.

Although the counsellors' interventions entail help-provision, their reception by the clients is not always favourable, and the place where they are implemented – the counselling centre – is not always associated with assistance. Sometimes the place triggers unpleasant memories, bitter reflections and even suffering. It is particularly the case when re-thinking of the self and the world turns out inevitable and is expected to be unflattering for the adult.

### **The counselling centre as a place of ambivalent actions**

Ubiquitous in daily conversations, the media and the literature, the criticism of the educational system bewails the conservative model of education based on discipline, encyclopaedic knowledge and the requirement of unconditional submission to authorities. The marketisation of education turns educational institutions into places where segregation is perpetuated and social inequalities aggravated, thereby fuelling pathologisation processes. The counselling centre as an “annexe” supporting the school (the term coined by Tadeusz Tomaszewski) is subject to the same transformations as the school and other educational institutions, where help turns into a service and human subjectivity finds itself endangered by man being re-named as “a client.” Such attributes of the counselling centre as common access, egalitarianism and free services should help promote equal educational opportunity for all children and the youth. However, the social function is surpassed by economic considerations and the market rules. As a result, the counselling centre's role becomes ambiguous, to say the least, which has already been addressed in the literature. As a place of ambiguous operations, it has attracted the attention and fuelled the development of critical counselling represented, among others, by Józef Kargul, Bożena Wojtasik, Kazimierz Frieske and Alicja Czerkawska (cf. Siarkiewicz, ed. 2004). The critique targets such negative developments within the counselling process as segregation, labelling and manipulation, which are caused by various factors.

Transformations of everyday life, which has come to be permeated by risk (Beck, 2002, 2004), i.e. a permanent lack of stability, affect also the counselling centre's operations. The place tends to produce quite divergent experiences. The counselling centre as a place of help-provision on some occasions offers security while on other ones it deprives its visitors of it, turning into a place of stigmatisation and branding. In the same place – the counselling centre – two contradictory things come to pass concomitantly: restorative counselling and oppression – segregation. The segregation processes commence as early as people start to seek help. This is particularly acute in small communities, where the counselling services network

is poorly developed, or just non-existent, and consulting a counsellor takes a trip to a bigger town. Although there are 565 centres in Poland (IBE, [www.datawrapper.de](http://www.datawrapper.de)), they are very unevenly distributed, with the Opole Province boasting the fewest (16) and the Mazovia Province the most (79) of them. Unequal access to the helping facilities and professionals is a sign of segregation, perhaps of social discrimination even.

Segregation at the place of help-provision is related to how its services are organised in terms of adherence to the zoning rules. With strict rules in place, the counsellors are responsible for particular schools and have precisely assigned tasks. Zoning and narrow specialisation combined with restrictive admission procedures put guidance-seekers through “threshold selection.” And the postulate of “help for everybody” is being replaced with the rule of “help for the chosen ones” – those who persevere in waiting for a visit, fit the centre’s organisational schema as well as its vision and range of services, are registered residents of a given district or live in a particular area. Help and counselling become rationed, especially when it comes to corrective and therapeutic interventions, which, for various reasons, may be used only by a limited number of students.

Labelling, in turn, is connected with diagnosing which, as Charles Kennedy admonishes, serves to subdue people by giving them a psychological label they will never be able to shake off (Kennedy, 2010, p. 159). Diagnosing may help a child, but it may also turn into a label, a mark or even a lasting stigma. Labels, such as “hyperactivity” or “dyslexia,” included in written guidance, make the diagnosis sound generalised and obscure the individual qualities, capabilities and behaviours. Only when they are brought to light can help-provision be effective. However, the counsellors rely on counterproductive categorisation, which mostly expresses their domination and desire to control others and violates the ethical principles of helping.

The above observations suggest that the counselling centre as a place of ambivalent operations fulfils two important roles: it induces and yet, at the same time, thwarts change. The counsellors engage not only in honest and noble-minded actions but also in manipulation, segregation and labelling, though it is not always their own choice. The counselling centre has its determinist, selective and emancipatory facets, all of which deserve studying

### **Counselling centre as a place of the exercise of power**

Power permeates all spheres of life. It is a variety of social inequality (Sztompka, 2012, p. 427) bound up with supremacy, dominance and inequities in personal and social relations. Max Weber, a classic researcher of power, defines power as “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance” (Weber in Sztompka, 2012, p. 430). The entanglement of the counselling centre in power relationships results from two basic

conditions – the institutional and formal character of the centre and the intervention methods based on individual contacts and interactions. Power appears here in two contexts – in relations between social ranks (director vs. employees) and in helping relations (counsellor vs. counselee) (cf. Kargul, 2004; Mielczarek, 2009; Siarkiewicz, 2004; Szumigraj, 1998).

The counselling centre is a place where social relations are formalised, which grounds legal power based, as M. Weber observes, on legal regulations. This ensures efficient organisation of work and defines accurately the procedures of help-provision, the issuing of certificates and opinions and the rules of admission. It also regulates relations between the director and employees with regard to work scheduling, selection and implementation of particular intervention measures and performance monitoring. Disciplinary power in the counselling centre has been studied by Elzbieta Siarkiewicz (2004, s. 15-45; 2010). It is to be found in space arrangement (separate offices for the director and specialists, sequencing of the help route that starts at the front office, etc.) and in overriding bureaucracy, which is inviting ever more criticism from the parents forced to collect and fill in many forms before the helping process is initiated.<sup>3</sup> The procedures are, admittedly, inscribed in the legislation on the responsibilities, rights, duties and competences of director and counsellors; however, their over-interpretation often produces bureaucratic pathologies.

That hierarchical arrangement of human relationships is typical of institutions is a widespread belief. Equally common is the belief that in such contexts holding a senior position entitles one to demand certain professional performance and behaviour from others, to decide on the kinds and ways of help-provision, to give orders and to have them enacted. In the director-employee relationship, power is the director's prerogative. In the counsellor-counselee relationship, power is the counsellor's prerogative. Power is associated with particular competences. The director's competences include defining the scope of the counsellors' duties, fixing their working hours and laying down the internal procedures of help-provision, issuing certificates and drawing up opinions. The counsellor's competences include the selection of helping strategies and intervention methods as well as adjusting the research tools to the way in which guidance is drafted.

Another kind of power is linked to the influence exerted on others in personal interactions which are a form of counselling interventions. This kind of power is related to the asymmetry inherent in the dichotomous division into the counsellor and the counselee, in which the counsellor is the dominant party. Within counselling contacts, power is often grounded on particular techniques of conversation, encouragement or persuasion, and tends to be accepted and consented to. The

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<sup>3</sup> On the dissatisfaction of advice-seekers and the criticism of excessive formalism rife in the psychological-pedagogical counselling centre, see my *Poradnictwo instytucjonalne okresu przemian. Kontynuacja i zmiany (Institutional counselling in the transformation period: Continuation and changes)* (Skałbania, 2012).



parental acceptance of educational measures and solutions the counsellor suggests for the child buttresses the counsellor's personal authority. If the counselling suggestions are disapproved of, it takes place outside the counselling centre and influences their practical application. The parent's decision to withhold the centre's certificate without informing the school about it illustrates a lack of coordination among the counselling centre, the family and the school and a disapproval for the content of the certificate.

The counsellor's knowledge and competences are facets of power in the counselling relation. They are the means to professional ends, which additionally produces a threat of manipulation. Potentially determining the quality and course of the helping process, the expert's power may facilitate the meeting of help-recipients' expectations but also trigger their frustration and complexes. The ways of exercising power, which is intrinsic to every interaction, are well known, widely described and directly perceivable. Less known, however, are the feelings, experiences and sensations of individuals who go through submission and find themselves on the opposite pole of the domination relationship.

Given the multitude of studies of power in counselling, it seems quite pertinent to ask whether the counselling centre is perhaps a place of "subtle oppression" inflicted on both its employees and the help-seekers. E. Siarkiewicz encapsulates it pithily: "young people seeking help or support and those who are supposed to help them find their own vocational path are drawn into the machinery of power, which harnesses time, space, content and ways of communicating" (Siarkiewicz, 2004, p. 20). Clearly, answering the question requires a comprehensive insight into the counselling centre, the diverse meanings attributed to it and the help-seekers' personal feeling and emotions.

### **The counselling centre as a magical place**

Help-seekers tend to perceive the counselling centre as an as yet unexplored place bathed in an aura of mystery, a space where "magic" and "taboo" interpenetrate and advice and guidelines on *what should be done* and *how to do it* interweave with prohibitions about *what must not be done*. The very term "magic" popularly designates the activity of sundry "professional" sorcerers, witch doctors and shamans, and as such it should not be used to refer to the interventions of counsellors – educated people aware of their roles and responsibilities. What is magic? The Polish *Dictionary of Foreign Terms* (1995, p. 674) defines magic as: 1. *The totality of beliefs and practices based on the conviction that supernatural powers exist and can be controlled by spells and rites* 2. *A unique power of exerting influence and affecting others*. Is magic but a relic of a distant past and does it affect only people with little education? Bronisław Malinowski (1990) may help answer this: magic can be found where coincidences or accidents soar and intense hopes clash with fears. Magic,

however, does not appear where things are certain, reliable and fully subject to rational methods and technological processes. These observations perfectly justify the presence of magic in postmodernity, which is distinctly insecure, unpredictable and irrational. Though variously defined in ethnography, philosophy and religion, magic has one feature consistently attributed to it: manipulation of reality through entrenched rites. Undoubtedly, in counselling, actions are ritualised, influence is exerted, and manipulation is not unheard of (Siarkiewicz, 2010; Wojtasik, 2009). Hence my attempts at tracing magic where guidance is provided and help extended.

Without doubt, many people perceive the counselling centre as a magical, unknown, mysterious and surprising place. Mystery resides in the space which the clients gradually explore; it hides behind the doors of counsellors' offices, breeding an aura of magic as a response to things strange and unfamiliar.

Magic seems also to permeate the counsellors' thoughts and words, which evoke various emotional states in the guidance-recipients, convinced that the place wields a unique power to make things happen. Magical thinking enables one to envision a better future, helps design the expected changes and proves one's faith in success. Magical thinking is exemplified, for instance, in "hoping that drafting diagnoses will improve teachers' work" (Wojciechowski, 2002, p. 9). The confidence that the counsellor can change the child and its behaviour ensues from attributing causative powers to him/her. The counsellor is a healer who works miracles, casts spells, effectively influences the reality, undoes evil and conjures up good. Such convictions improve the general physical and mental state of help-seekers and frame the counselling centre as an institution where unbelievable, rationally inexplicable things come to pass. As a parent said: "I expect that they'll help me here [at the counselling centre – B. S.] and do something with my child, it's my last resort."<sup>4</sup> The "something" in this utterance is full of magic; it embodies unknown actions, especially ones that are incredibly powerful. The parents' hope for a change mingles with uncertainty, filling the space of the counselling centre with difficult questions: How? Why? What should I do? What is the best thing to do? How long will it take? The mystery and magic of the place are well conveyed in such metaphors as: "a place of catharsis," "unveiling," "counselling under compulsion," "struggles of the conscience," "the malady of the soul," "an invitation to self-search" (cf. Skałbania, 2012; Kennedy, 2010).

Frequently, the parents themselves imbue the counselling centre as a place with agentive powers by investing it with hopes, doubts and expectations. For some, it is a place where they will receive an expected certificate or opinion; for others, it may be a place of an educational failure, particularly when they realise what mistakes they have made in their relationship with the child; for others still, it produces disappointment and doubt since their expectations have not been met.

<sup>4</sup> An excerpt from a parent's utterance on the parents' expectations vis-à-vis the counselling centre.

## The counselling centre as a workplace

The counselling centre as a workplace has been and is quite hermetic since due to the limitations on the number of staff they employ only few people. As educational institutions, counselling centres employ mainly professionals with background in education, psychology and sociology. Psychologists, educators, speech therapists and career counsellors have teacher status and perform tasks defined in ministerial ordinances. Their tasks and intervention methods, as described in detail in the regulations of the Ministry of National Education, are mandatory for all public counselling centres across Poland. The centralised system of organisation of counselling services provokes reflection on formalism and subordination pervasive in it. This, in turn, makes the counsellors perceive their professional creativity and agency as severely constrained (Skałbania, 2012, pp. 90-96). The legislation in place causes the counsellors to think of the counselling centre as an institution or an office and, accordingly, adopt the role of administrators who guard the law. The counsellors' ethical dilemmas are drowned out by pressures to issue diagnoses, pervasive haste and the demands of the authorities, which view statistical data as a basis of assessment. Boards of education view the counselling centre nearly as a place of production where the amount of guidance (opinions, certificates, etc.) produced determines the facility's quality and its position in the rankings of popularity or social usefulness.

With counselling framed as a technological process, psychologists and educators focus excessively on the bureaucratic apparatus, in which exams and achievement tests are all important. The counsellors continue to look for diagnostic tools, ignoring at the same time their own personalities as a capital facilitating effective work with the clients. They think of their workplace in terms of a study equipped primarily with specialised diagnostic tools. This inclines them to understand their role as comprised mainly of diagnosing, evaluating and measuring the students' properties and traits. Consequently, the counselling centre tends to be associated with the counsellor-diagnostician inscribed in the models of an expert and a guide (Wojtasik, 1993, 1994).<sup>5</sup> As a result of transformations in social reality, the counselling centre has accrued a new meaning graspable in the market terminology of speed, efficiency, competitiveness and cost-effectiveness. Under the influence of these general transformations, especially the economic ones, the counselling centre's operations change, which is observable in the growing tendency for counselling centres to launch promotion campaigns. Like schools, counselling centres solicit clients through newspaper adverts and leaflets distributed in schools, offering them and their families a wide range of helping and support services.

With changes going on, the meanings that the counsellors attribute to the counselling centre as a place keep transforming as well. Today, the counselling centre

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<sup>5</sup> For the counsellor models, see Bożena Wojtasik (1993, 1994).

is no longer a place which guarantees employment continuity, professional stability and financial security. Neither do the counsellors enjoy social and occupational prestige or a socially and financially privileged position. Observably, the counsellors realise it and re-cast the new meanings of their workplace in the context of their personal, professional and social lives.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the counselling centre as a place imbued with various meanings implies that it is a site of important educational and social processes with highly individual implications. With diverse, often contradictory actions unfolding in it, the same place not only offers knowledge and shapes attitudes but also breeds various experiences and emotional states, not always positive ones. People who engage with the counselling centre make sense of it in a number of ways. Children and the youth find it an unfamiliar, slightly mysterious place where they are supposed to put on display themselves, their skills and knowledge. For the parents, it is a place of educational reflection where they hope to see their children changed and “healed” by a “magical” power. The teachers expect the counselling centre to solve educational problems quickly and effectively, so it is a place where educational mistakes are corrected. The counsellors themselves view the counselling centre as a place where income is earned, experience gained, social and professional life enjoyed, expertise applied and, sometimes, dreams realised. Sometimes, however, they see it as an office. The authorities perceive the counselling centre as an arena of educational activity, subject to systematic evaluation and formal control, where the main focus is on the products the counselling interventions yield, that is, on opinions and certificates.

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