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Manifestations and Effects of Everyday Resistance in Student Dormitories

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Student dormitories in Slovenia are educational residential institutions, primarily intended for upper secondary school students whose place of study is geographically distant from their family home. Their aim is to support students' academic success and personal development through structured living, educational guidance, and psychosocial support. However, the institutional social control and disciplinary acts incite resistance that can function to reproduce or shift dormitory norms and structures, with ambiguous effect for the empowerment of the students. Leaning on the ideas of critical-emancipatory social pedagogy, the article explores dormitory counsellors' perceptions of everyday resistance and asks two research questions. Firstly, how does everyday resistance manifest itself in shifting student dormitory norms and structures and with what effects? Secondly, how does everyday resistance manifest itself in reproducing dormitory norms and structures and with what effects? Five semi-structured interviews with dormitory counsellors were conducted, focusing on examples of everyday resistance. The analysis is grounded in theoretical conceptualisations of power, resistance and critical-emancipatory social pedagogy. Findings suggest that everyday resistance in student dormitories is a pedagogical opportunity for reflexive negotiation of institutional life and regulation of oppressive and productive practices related to intersectional inequalities.

Keywords: youth in residential institutions, everyday resistance, agency, intersectional inequalities, student dormitories

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Pojavne oblike in učinki vsakdanjega odpora v dijaških domovih

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~ Dijaški domovi v Sloveniji so vzgojno-izobraževalne nastanitvene ustanove, namenjene predvsem dijakom in dijakinjam, katerih kraj šolanja je zemljepisno oddaljen od njihovega doma. Namen dijaških domov je s strukturiranim prebivanjem, z vzgojnim delovanjem in s psihosocialno podporo prispevati k učnemu uspehu ter osebnostnemu razvoju dijakov in dijakinj. Institucionalni nadzor in disciplinski ukrepi pa vzbujajo odpor, ki lahko prispeva k reprodukciji ali pa spreminjanju domskih norm in struktur, pri čemer so učinki na opolnomočenje dijakinj in dijakov lahko večpomenski. Na ozadju idej kritično-emancipatorne socialne pedagogike članek raziskuje, kako domski svetovalni delavci in delavke vidijo vsakdanji odpor, ter zastavlja dve raziskovalni vprašanji: 1) kako se vsakdanji odpor kaže pri spreminjanju domskih norm in struktur ter kakšne učinke ima; 2) kako se vsakdanji odpor kaže pri reprodukciji domskih norm in struktur ter kakšne učinke ima. Izvedenih je bilo pet polstrukturiranih intervjujev s svetovalnimi delavci in delavkami dijaških domov. Analiza temelji na teoretskih konceptualizacijah moči, odpora in kritično-emancipatorne socialne pedagogike. Ugotovitve kažejo, da vsakdanji odpor v dijaških domovih predstavlja pedagoško priložnost za refleksivno soustvarjanje domskega vsakdanjika ter uravnavanje opresivnih in produktivnih praks, povezanih z intersekcijskimi neenakostmi.

Ključne besede: mladi v dijaških domovih, vsakdanji odpor, zmožnost delovanja, intersekcijske neenakosti

Introduction

Student dormitories in Slovenia are educational residential institutions, primarily intended for upper secondary school for students whose place of study is geographically distant from their family home. Currently there are 36 student dormitories in Slovenia. They are an integral part of the public education system of the country. These institutions contribute to the quality of upper secondary education by functioning not only as accommodation facilities but also as settings which offer educational guidance and support (Marc, 2023).

The normative framework of dormitory life is governed by aims and objectives defined by the *Educational Program for Student Dormitories (Vzgojni program za dijaške domove, 2011)* and grounded in the *General Upper Secondary School Act (Zakon o gimnazijah, 1996)*, *Organization and Financing of Education Act (Zakon o organizaciji in financiranju vzgoje in izobraževanja, 1996)* and *Act on Vocational and Professional Education (Zakon o poklicnem in strokovnem izobraževanju, 2006)*. The focus is on creating a cultural environment that supports basic human rights, values and widely accepted social norms as outlined in the *White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia (Bela knjiga o vzgoji in izobraževanju v Republiki Sloveniji, 2011)*.

Student dormitories also address students' specific needs, with daily routines closely tied to schooling. Rules prescribe study time, meals, curfew, silence at night and room hygiene. The document *Rules on Accommodation in Student Dormitories (Pravilnik o bivanju v dijaških domovih, 2018)* also prohibits substance abuse and violence and mandates participation in dormitory activities.

With their structured schedules, power hierarchies between staff and students, and classification practices of grouping students into residential groups (*vzgojna skupina*) with an assigned mentor/educator (*matični vzgojitelj*), dormitories resemble Goffman's (1991) total institutions, characterised by social control and disciplinary practices regulating dormitories every day.

Institutional power in student dormitories can be viewed both as repressive and enabling. Using the concept of productive power within the apparatus of security (Foucault, 1978, 1980, 2007) rules and practices can be seen as both regulatory and supportive, aiming to empower students. Such an understanding of institutional power allows for addressing social control in dormitories not merely as punitive surveillance but also as enabling regulation of the living environment. Dormitory regulations guide students towards meeting schooling demands and developing competences for personal growth, autonomy, and equitable inclusion in society (Marc, 2023).

Counsellors (*svetovalni delavci*) play a key role in structuring a wide range of relations between students, family, dormitory and school, overseeing intake, group formation, and psychosocial and educational support (Marc, 2023). The hierarchical power relation allows for disciplinary acts which can be interpreted as symbolic violence, legitimised by hegemonic power relations (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000; Foucault, 1991). Research indicates that symbolic violence entails pre-chosen meanings and methods of pedagogical act that tend to regulate the behaviour of agents in accordance with normative expectations of the society and the institution (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). All pedagogic action is “symbolic violence insofar as it is imposition of cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000, p. 6). This statement should not be understood as a moral judgement on the hierarchical structure of staff-student relationships in dormitories, but as an invitation to examine the consequences of that hierarchy.

While symbolic violence relates to cultural and social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000), some scholars criticise it as too deterministic, limiting agency and resistance (Malpas et al., 2016; McNay, 1999; Morgan & Björkert, 2006; Mottier, 2002; Witz, 2004). However, Bourdieu and Passeron (2000) emphasise the relative autonomy of agents exercising symbolic violence. These agents can act reflectively, adapting the methods and content of their work with students in dormitories. In this they are autonomous and preconditioned, because their work “entails the impossibility (...) of freely defining the mode of imposition, the content imposed and the public on which it imposes it” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000, p. 27). As Yeatman insightfully suggests: “Domination can be used to control others in order to serve interests of the powerful, or domination can work democratically to extend or even constitute the powers of subjects” (1997, p. 45).

Institutional power also incites resistance (Kallio & Honkatukia, 2022), which can provide opportunities to practice critical agency and structure alternative practices. Interactions between enforcing and resisting agents can become a fruitful playground for critical pedagogical action (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994) by gaining critical insights into oppressive elements of reality. These oppressive elements relate to the structures of social inequality based on differences in social-economic background, race and ethnicity, gender, and more. Theories of intersectionality consider multiple interconnections between socially constructed positions (Crenshaw, 1991; Nash, 2008) based on categories such as race, gender, etc. While they are “too simplistic to capture the complexity of lived experience” (McCall, 2005, p. 1776), they nevertheless reflect the inequality among social groups (McCall, 2005).

Staff practicing critical-emancipatory social pedagogy in dormitories not only support students in adapting to society, but also in critically questioning social inequalities and oppressive structures (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009; Hämäläinen, 2012). Empowerment is achieved by developing critical consciousness and agency, enabling change in oppressive conditions (Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2011; Freire, 2000; Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009). Counsellors support students in producing and reproducing tools for social adaptation and transformation. Transformative social pedagogy is in constant need of reinvention and adjustment according to the context of their application (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Freire, 2000). As an engaged pedagogy aiming to transgress the existing social inequalities, critical-emancipatory social pedagogy addresses personal struggles as political and thus politicises the individual struggles in what hooks (1994) frames as education as the practice of freedom.

Dormitories are structured and structuring institutional environments that in relation to the wider social context have relative autonomy (Bourdieu, 2018; Wacquant, 1992). Staff negotiate between enabling the transformation or preservation of the field (Wacquant, 1992). Power struggles involving opposition and action can be interpreted as resistance (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). Various researchers have identified action and opposition as core elements of resistance and developed typologies based on whether the resistance is intended by the actor and recognised by target or observer. Overt resistance is intended and recognised by both while covert resistance is intended by actor but only recognised by observer (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). This typology provides an analytical tool for analysing everyday resistance in institutions. However, some argue that such a typology contradicts the aim to conceptualise “resistance as a complex and ongoing process of social construction” (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014, p. 418) and claim that the acts of resistance should be considered “within ongoing processes of negotiation between different agents of resistance” (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014, p. 418), such as resisters, the targets and the observers. Johansson & Vinthagen (2014) propose four analytical dimensions of everyday resistance that need to be considered in their intersections, as follows: 1) repertoires of everyday resistance, 2) relations between actors, 3) spatialisation and 4) temporalisation of resistance.

Moreover, Johansson and Vinthagen (2014) stress that everyday resistance is a practice, historically entangled with power rather than defined by consciousness, intent, or outcome. It is intersectional, heterogeneous, and context-dependent, with the potential to undermine or reinforce power relations (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014, p. 418). Resistance within the institutional hierarchies cannot be assumed to be empowering or disempowering; its effects on

individuals, groups and institutions must be analysed. In this paper, we emphasise making a distinction between resistance that undermines or strengthens agency in the process of evaluating the effects of everyday resistance in student dormitories.

In summary, while student dormitories in Slovenia aim to support academic success and personal development through structured living, guidance, and psychosocial support, the institutional power relations, social control and disciplinary acts can function both as enabling and oppressive. Using the framework of critical-emancipatory social pedagogy, this paper conceptualises everyday resistance and demonstrates opportunities for encounters beyond disciplinary and punitive measures: how institutional power and resistance can both be recognised as opportunities for empowerment and social learning, rather than just as coercive control.

In this article we theorise and conceptualise the everyday resistance in student dormitories as practices of (re)production of institutional norms and also their negotiations and shifts. We address the agency of institutional actors such as counsellors and students in chosen examples of everyday resistance and discuss the empowering/disempowering effects of both reproduction and shifts of institutional norms and structures. We explore counsellors' perceptions of everyday resistance and its effects in the context of student dormitories. In the present article we address the following research questions:

How does everyday resistance manifest itself in shifting student dormitory norms and structures and with what effects?

How does everyday resistance manifest itself in reproducing student dormitory norms and structures and with what effects?

Method

Participants

The paper is grounded in a small-scale pilot study aiming to identify the key problems that arise in relation to the research problem of manifestation and effects of everyday resistance in student dormitories. The sample consisted of five counsellors employed in upper-secondary student dormitories in Slovenia. By purposive sampling we aimed to include dormitories that represented a variety regarding the size (from approximately 72 to 390 student places), location (two in bigger cities, two in towns, one in the countryside), and type of dormitory (three independent dormitories and two integrated in school centres). We interviewed one counsellor from each of the chosen dormitories. The counsellors were selected because of their comprehensive insight into institutional

processes and their positioning at the crossroads of interests, conflict resolving and supporting fruitful cooperation between students, educators, school, family and other relevant experts, institutions and organisations.

Instruments

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview questions were developed in advance, informed by the theoretical framework on institutional power, control, and resistance. The guiding questions were focused on rules of conduct in dormitories, student behaviour and resistance practices, institutional responses to resistance and shifts and continuities in dormitory norms and structures. One example of a guiding question is as follows: What forms of oppositional behaviour do you encounter most frequently, and how do you respond to them? The information on the research and the preliminary interview questions were sent to the counsellors prior to the interview. Participation was voluntary. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed using open coding procedures derived from grounded theory, and were then organised around central ideas of the text and grouped into categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Richards & Morse, 2013). The analytical process proceeded in several stages: initial open coding of interview transcripts, identification of central ideas emerging from the data, grouping codes into broader conceptual categories, and refinement of categories within the theoretical framework of institutional power, control and resistance.

Through the process of open coding, 68 codes were produced, which were structured into four main categories: rules of conduct, intersectional differences, reproduction of dormitory norms and structures, and shifts in dormitory norms and structures. While all four categories were relevant for analysis, the categories "reproduction of dormitory norms and structures" and "shifts in dormitory norms and structures" most closely address the research questions of the study and the purpose of the present article. Thus, this article focuses on presenting the analysis of selected data excerpts that most strongly contributed to understanding the manifestations and effects of everyday resistance in student dormitories and the ways such resistance may reproduce or transform existing institutional norms and structures.

Results and Discussion

Shifts in Dormitory Norms and Structures

The following analysis addresses the manifestation of everyday resistance in shifting student dormitory norms and structures and evaluates the effects of these shifts. To explore the resistance, the change and their effect, we focus on two issues that arose during our interviews with the counsellors: the phenomena of night-time studying and the problem of overdue bills for the dormitory accommodation. Thus, our analysis of the data focuses on examples of how institutional agents such as counsellors and students practiced their agency in ongoing processes of negotiation (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014), which resulted in a partial shifting of institutional practices. First, we analyse the resistance of students against the institutional rule of no night-time studying and explore the process of power negotiations in shifting the institutional rules. Secondly, we analyse the resistance of the counsellor who contributed to the shift in disempowering institutional structure in order to protect the students from oppressive experiences due to their socio-economic status.

Night-Time Studying – in the Classrooms or Under the Shower With a Headlamp?

Student dormitories support upper-secondary students in completing their educational programmes and achieving socially accepted signs of successful transition to adulthood and have a definitive role in creating opportunities for empowering agency. In accordance with power as productive (Foucault, 1978, 1980), the dormitory rules regarding curfew, night-time silence and order and regime of afternoon studying hours are made in order to support the structuring of the environment that is beneficial for the residents. However, students may resist these structures by returning late, skipping studying hours, studying at night or by socialising and listening to music during the night. These acts can be interpreted as acts of resistance according to Hollander and Einwohner (2004); they are clearly acts of opposition to the norm. Agents are more or less conscious of the intent of breaking the rules, the targets of the oppositional behaviour are institutional staff imposing the norms and the acts are also recognised as resistance by the educators or counsellors.

During the exam period, students often resist the no night-time studying rule by choosing to study late in classrooms or their rooms. Dormitory staff hold institutional authority to enforce the rule (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000) and demand the students to stop studying and go to sleep. In this case the

power struggle between staff as agents of social control and students as agents of overt resistance (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004) takes place; the students practice their agency in intentionally opposing the rule and targeting staff with demanding to stay awake late and study.

Strictly enforcing the rule has unpredictable effects: it can either empower students by supporting study efforts or disempower them through exhaustion. Figueiredo (2024) showed that chronotype and sleep habits influence young people's behaviour and while late chronotype individuals prefer late tasks, the lack of sleep causes irritability and other behavioural problems. When rules are strictly enforced, the resistance shifts its mode. Previously overt resistance turns to covert resistance (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004); students intentionally break the rule, but they do this so that the agent of institutional control does not recognise it. In light of the inflexible institutional rule, the students invent alternative practices to resist. The following interview excerpt demonstrates the dormitory counsellor's reflection on how students continued with night-time studying, but they did it in such a way that the educators or night-guards could or should not notice them – in their bathrooms, even in bathrooms under the shower, using the headlamps:

When we tried to limit it, we realised it is almost impossible. We cannot just tell students at midnight that they are no longer allowed to study. If someone has been studying for a long time, it is very difficult to stop them – then they go and study in the bathroom, under the shower, right? I mean, can we really forbid them to study? I honestly don't know how parents would understand that. This year, for example, we have seen a lot of this night-time studying – it is becoming more and more frequent. We have a lot of problems with it, yes, because then they are exhausted and it is very hard to manage. It becomes a vicious cycle. But when you are in the situation – what is the night guard supposed to do, tell them they must stop studying? So then they go into the bathrooms, under the showers, with headlamps, hiding. And you start thinking, aren't we ridiculous? If someone wants to study, surely, we should allow them to do so. (Counsellor 1)

Thus, the resistance itself cannot be interpreted as a priori empowering or disempowering for the agency of the student, nor do we a priori know whether the resistance to the rule of no night-time studying is in fact in accordance with the broader normative framework of the dormitory or not. For example, while studying during night-time is forbidden and the student studying during the night breaks the rules of conduct, the intent of the student's resistance is

aligned with the normative aim of the institution, namely successful schooling. Though the resistance is intended, the aim of the resistance is aligned with the norms both the student and the counsellor agree on. This opens up a possibility for negotiation; both agents encountering each other in the act of resistance enter the ongoing process of negotiation (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014), in which different repertoires of resistance must be addressed according to the dimensions of spatiality, temporality and relationality (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014). For example, the institution can show flexibility and allow night-time studying during intensive exam periods. Some dormitories enable these students to study late in the classrooms:

When there is a particularly intense period, with many tests, there may indeed be more late-night studying, simply because they cannot manage to get everything done during the day – they have trainings, all sorts of activities... We allow them to study late in classrooms, but it is important that they actually study. If they are in the study room chatting and making noise, then the night security guard sends them back to their rooms. What matters is that they still get their studying done. (Counsellor 3)

The counsellors and educators use their autonomy to bend the rules and even support the resistance of the students, to provide them with a legitimate opportunity to engage in night-time studying in a supportive environment (classroom instead of bathroom). Such flexibility can be empowering; the student as the agent of resistance can experience that his/her needs have been recognised and he/she is being supported. The sensitivity in institutional response can even make the rules seem more legitimate afterwards, when they are imposed again (after the end of the exam period).

On occasions when staff are flexible in their imposition of the rules, the institutional relations of authority remain untouched; according to Johansson & Vinthagen (2014), the spatiality and temporality in the episode must be considered. The flexibility of the rules around night-time studying is exercised at this particular time (during intensive exam periods) and can also be conditioned by whether the student has been also attending afternoon study hours or not. For example, if the student skips the studying hours in the afternoon and then studies instead in the night, his resistance is not met with flexibility of the staff – which cannot be simplistically defined as oppressive. For example, counsellors explained that the students would like to be outside during the afternoons, would like to skip study hours, but then they study during the night and are exhausted the next day in school – and soon fall into a vicious cycle of switching night and day; this obviously has disempowering effects on their wellbeing and achievements:

The educators pay close attention to such things. It's important that they monitor students throughout the day – if a student spends the whole afternoon lying in bed, unwilling to do anything, or is out all day having fun and then wants to study at night, that becomes a topic for discussion. After all, this pattern cannot go on indefinitely – they end up tired, sleep-deprived, they swap day for night, and so on. So we have conversations about how important sleep is, and then we gradually help them to re-establish a different rhythm. (Counsellor 2)

It seems that everyday resistance is indeed “heterogenous and contingent due to changing contexts and situations” (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014, p. 418); while shifting the institutional rule of no night-time studying seems to be predominantly temporary (i.e. during exam periods) the counsellors exposed a group of students that need a permanent adjustment in institutional practice. These are the students who attend high-achieving grammar schools; the timetable of these students might be full of both study-related obligations including grammar school in the morning, and other extra-curricular activities that are recognised as highly academically appreciated, such as music and ballet school in the evening. As the interview excerpt below suggests, the counsellor recognised this group of students as those with special needs and expresses support for a more permanent shifting of the institutional rule for them:

We have a special group of students from high achieving grammar schools. They are housed in a separate section of the dormitory. Since we have been accommodating these students, we have realised that they represent a special category, primarily because their main focus is school, grades, and achievement [...] they need silence, they often study late at night, and a great deal of adjustments must be made for them. (Counsellor 4)

It seems that when institutional rules regarding night rest and learning hours get into contradiction with the institutional aim of supporting students in successful schooling, the symbolic and cultural capital of students from high-achieving general upper-secondary schools seems to bring them more power for the resistance. Permanent shifts in institutional rules are spatially limited (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014); adjustments are deliberate and reserved for a particular group of students. More temporary shifts occur for other students, whose need for such adjustment is not recognised as permanent.

Our analysis so far focused on everyday resistance in which the students acted as agents of resistance in negotiation on the no night-time studying rule

with the pedagogical staff assigned to impose this rule. However, resistance can be enacted also by the institutional staff. We address this next.

Concealing the Socio-Economic Position of Students

The agents of everyday resistance in student dormitories are not only students but also the staff, such as counsellors and educators. Counsellors and students are situated in the field of forces and struggles (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000), meaning that their everyday practices take place in the tension between the possibilities for change (struggles) and the probabilities of predetermined practice (forces). According to Bourdieu and Passeron (2000), they are agents delegated with legitimate authority to enact practices aligned with institutional aims of equality, successful schooling, etc. However, these agents also have relative autonomy (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). This means that their practices are not totally prescribed but can be invented and changed to better suit the aim of institutional empowerment. One of these aims is also preventing discrimination on the basis of circumstances, such as socio-economic background.

A counsellor aware of intersectional inequalities (Crenshaw, 1991; Nash, 2008) and who recognises the disempowering effects of certain institutional practices for students in general and for those with lower social-economic status, can use their authority and autonomy to shift norms and practices with the aim to empower students in their struggles for more productive norms regulating student dormitory practices. For example, institutional bureaucratic practices regarding late dormitory fee payments had previously been addressed by confronting the student directly. The counsellor changed this practice so that the accounting office contacts parents instead, preventing educators from confronting the student and protecting them from potential stigma. The following example illustrates the counsellor's perception of how this change in institutional practice took place through successful struggle:

We began to look at the issue of socio-economic status in a more sensitive way. Previously, it often happened that, after three months of unpaid bills, educators would ask the students directly: "Why haven't your parents paid?" This was simply the system at the time. I personally wanted to change this system for a long time, given how many students I knew were distressed by having to face educators about this issue. It took us many years to convince the principal to transfer all communication regarding financial matters to the accounting department. The accounting department now communicates directly with parents, with educators having little or no knowledge of these exchanges. The idea was to conceal, as much as possible, the socio-economic position of students

- where they stand on the stratification ladder compared to their peers
- so that this information would not be so publicly visible, as it could be extremely stressful for students. (Counsellor 5)

According to Hollander and Einwohner (2004) the counsellor engaged in oppositional action, trying to convince the institution to change the practice regarding unpaid accommodation bills. The process involved ongoing negotiation (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014), and after a few years, the change became permanent, with reminders now sent directly to parents. This new structure is the result of resistance and is integrated into the institutional practice which is from now on enforcing itself automatically; the accounting department sends the reminders directly to parents and so the students are not exposed in front of the educators, counsellors or other students. This illustrates counsellors' relative autonomy in creating practices that not only reproduce but also transform institutional structures, addressing socio-economic inequalities. This is at the core of critical social pedagogic action, which presupposes an engaged pedagogue who recognises the illegitimate effects of the institutional symbolic violence and exercises autonomous agency (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000) to transgress existing inequalities (hooks, 1994).

This becomes an example of how resistance shifts the institutional practice by changing the structures of organisation. The effects are empowering for the students, since they are protected from the negative effects of discrimination and/or stigmatisation based on vulnerable socio-economic status. This is a telling example of power as productive (Foucault, 1978), and the use of domination to constitute the powers of the subjects (Yeatman, 1997). The analysis of the resistance shifting dormitory norms and structures demonstrates the complexity of residential institutions' everyday power relations and shows how staff can lean on the productive use of power (Foucault, 1978, 2007) to regulate a supportive environment which meets the needs of students.

Reproduction of Dormitory Norms and Structures

The following analysis addresses the manifestation of everyday resistance in reproducing student dormitory norms and structures and evaluates the effects of strengthening the domination. To explore the resistance, the reproduction of power relations and their effect, we focus on the institutional process of classifying students into roommate groups. Our analysis of data focuses on examples of counsellors' use of their institutional authority to regulate relations between students so that they would prevent oppressive experiences of students

in vulnerable subject positions based on their sexual orientation. As Messerschmidt (2017) demonstrated, subordinated boys try to comply with dominant hegemonic masculinity and so contribute to reproducing gender inequality. The analysis shows how critical social pedagogical acts produce a covert resistance to such reproduction (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004) and demonstrates how critical engagement with the milieu of the students can prevent discrimination and disempowerment (Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2011). Counsellors' careful selection of roommates, particularly in cases where students' sexual orientation is known, is intended to shape the student's environment so that it supports their well-being and helps develop supportive relationships.

Roommate Groups Are Not Just Put Together Randomly

Student dormitories expressing some characteristics of total institutions according to Goffman (1961) have strict rules governing everyday activities, clear power hierarchy and classification processes of grouping students into roommate groups and residential groups with an assigned educator as their mentor. However, the exercise of social control and classification practices in dormitories is not necessarily repressive. In our study we found examples of how productive power (Foucault, 2007) can affect the structuring of supportive relations between the students.

Counsellors are delegated legitimate power to shape the environment of the dormitory so that it contributes to equal and equitable inclusion (Marc, 2023), which is supported by the educational curriculum for student dormitories (*Educational Program for Student Dormitories*, 2011) and legislation (*Rules on Accommodation in Student Dormitories*, 2018). Counsellors thus legitimately enact power that reproduces the institutionalised norms and discourses on equality, human rights and non-discrimination. According to the theory of symbolic violence, such acts can be defined as such because they entail the imposition of arbitrary content on arbitrary methods (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000) to achieve legitimate, authorised objectives. Supporting equality and non-discrimination in the student dormitory is such an objective.

In order to contribute to shaping supportive relations between the students, counsellors pay a great deal of attention to how they form the student groups. At the beginning of the new school year and before the intake of new students, the dormitory counsellors and educators interview the students, after which they deliberate on group formation. They do consider the wishes of the students, but nevertheless they do have the final say and responsibility in deciding the composition of roommate groups:

When they enrol, ideally, we like them to tell who they would like to

share a room with, if they already know someone. If they do, that makes things much easier. (Counsellor 2)

Already at the time of enrolment, we take some extra time to talk to the students, and you can already get a sense of someone during that first conversation. Roommate groups are not just put together randomly – it takes a lot of time and careful consideration, looking at who might fit well with whom: okay, these two could go together, that one has different values, and so on. We are experienced, and we devote quite a bit of time to this process. (Counsellor 3)

The interviews with dormitory counsellors show that they understand and recognise that the encounters between students in dormitories every day can also have disempowering effects for students in intersectionally vulnerable positions. While the institutional norm is equality no matter the sexual orientation, the counsellor recognises that inequalities based on sexual orientation do play out in the dormitory every day and can have disempowering effects on the students. Thus, the counsellor acts strategically to prevent this from happening, and this demonstrates the importance of reflexive practice in dormitories, such as forming groups of students that share the rooms. Counsellors show sensitivity in ensuring student well-being, preventing stigmatisation, bullying or conflicts due to difference in sexual orientation:

When there is a boy who is gay, or whom we think might be gay... For these boys, it is very difficult to find a roommate. I have to somehow approach the students and ask if they would be okay sharing a room... I mean I don't say he is gay. I have to phrase it differently, but I think it would be wrong not to address it. Otherwise we run into serious problems, especially at the beginning when the parents arrive and the student arrives, and on the first day there are tears and complaints: "Who put me in this room? He's gay!" [...] So you need to find a boy who does not have as many issues with this, and that is essential. (Counsellor 5)

As Bartulović and Kušević (2024) demonstrated in relation to the school curriculum, there is an absence of systematic sexual minority inclusive approach in student dormitories. However, in line with critical-emancipatory social pedagogy that questions the social inequalities and oppressive structures (Grunwald & Tiersch, 2009; Hämäläinen, 2012), the counsellors use their institutional authority (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000) in pedagogical action that reproduces the institutional normativities of human rights, equality and non-discrimination of students. Moreover, the counsellors reflect on possible discrimination

of the non-heterosexual student and act to prevent this from occurring. This suggests the counsellors can and should be reflexive agents critically perceiving personal struggles of the students as political (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994) and use their productive power within the institution to contribute to safety and security (Foucault, 1978; 2007) or to a respectful social environment that can lead to a more successful everyday experience (Grunwald & Tiersch, 2009). According to Bourdieu and Passeron (2000) counsellors use legitimate symbolic violence (imposition of pre-chosen content such as human rights and non-discrimination with pre-chosen methods, such as careful consideration of grouping students in rooms) to contribute to the prevention of homophobic conflicts. These counsellors have symbolic and institutionally assigned authority to prevent the homosexual student from experiencing discrimination, thereby contributing to the constitution of the power of the subject (Yeatman, 1997).

The data suggest that the counsellors exercise relative autonomy of their agency (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000) and so adapt their working methods and content to respond more sensitively to the students. The counsellors enact resistance towards illegitimate effects of intersectional inequalities; they recognise the sexual orientation of the student being a potentially vulnerable subject position and act before the student is subjected to homophobic violence. Thus, the act of resistance is put in place by the counsellor but not necessarily recognised by the students classified by the counsellor as possibly having issues with homophobia. As such the resistance can be defined as covert resistance according to Hollander and Einwohner (2004). Moreover, the targets of such resistance are potential manifestations of social inequalities.

However, a more useful analytical point of view is to conceptualise the counsellors' reflexive action as a critical pedagogic practice, involving a complex and ongoing process of carefully considering who is placed in which room (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014). This is an example of how critical social-pedagogical acts can contribute to the construction of productive social situations. Social-pedagogical engagement with the milieu of the students aiming to influence directly or indirectly the development of empowering student relations and interactions is an important task (Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2011).

We have had students who identify as gay or lesbian – we still do – but there have been no issues. [...] Of course, we do pay attention to who is placed in which room. If we already know beforehand that a student identifies as gay or lesbian, we consider who they might get along with, who might be tolerant, and who might, for example, be homophobic. We would certainly not put them in a room with someone who is homophobic, as that could be very difficult for them. We are careful about this. (Counsellor 2)

Intersectionally sensitive roommate grouping can be interpreted as a practice of resistance against oppressive elements of social inequalities that could get reproduced in dormitories every day. Resistance to such illegitimate effects of pedagogical action is at the core of critical-emancipatory social pedagogy. As stated by Eichsteller and Holthoff, social pedagogues are and should be confident in “the process they can initiate together with individuals and groups to enhance their well-being, provide learning opportunities, develop relationships and enable them to empower themselves” (2011, p. 49). This resistance can be successful because counsellors use their institutional power responsibly and reflexively with the aim to restrict potential homophobia. This is also an example of how resistance to illegitimate and discriminative effects of social inequalities within the institution is reproducing legitimate power relations and dominance (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2014), in order to enhance the possibility of positive experiences and nurturing conditions for students.

Conclusions

This article examined everyday resistance in student dormitories in Slovenia by addressing two questions; how everyday resistance manifests in shifting student dormitory norms and structures and with what effects, and how it manifests in reproducing those norms and structures, and with what effects.

Everyday resistance in shifting student dormitory norms and structures is manifested through both students' and counsellors' actions that challenge and renegotiate institutional norms. For example, students resist the prohibition of night-time studying overtly (demanding rule flexibility) and covertly (studying secretly). Counsellors shift the dormitory rules temporarily, enabling late studying during exam periods but also supporting the students in re-establishing their sleeping routine. Both can have empowering effects for students. Moreover, counsellors resist disempowering dormitory practices and advocate for change, for example, by arranging that the overdue bill notification is sent by the accounting office directly to the parents instead of the student. This has an effect of reducing stigma and protecting students' dignity. Everyday resistance in reproducing student dormitory norms and structures is manifested through counsellors' reflexive and strategic use of institutional authority to shape supportive environments. For example, counsellors covertly resist oppressive social inequalities related to students' sexual orientation and form roommate groups with the aim of preventing discrimination and homophobic conflict. These practices strengthen the dormitory's normative framework and institutional norms of equality, human rights, and non-discrimination.

These findings suggest that everyday resistance in student dormitories constitutes a site of relatively autonomous agency for institutional actors, including counsellors and students. When resistance is interpreted as pedagogical opportunity rather than deviance, it can contribute to critical social-pedagogical action (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994) by enabling the reflexive negotiation of institutional life and power relations within the dormitory setting.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. As a pilot study based on a limited and targeted sample of student dormitories, the findings cannot be generalised across all dormitory contexts. Moreover, the analysis reflects only counsellors' perspectives, rather than including other stakeholders to help shape our understanding of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, the study provides preliminary insights that help map key themes and tensions in everyday dormitory life.

Future research should therefore extend this work by systematically including students' own perspectives on everyday resistance and how class, gender, and other social positions or circumstances shape resistance practices and their effects. For example, future research could address how opportunities for resistance are shaped for different students, also in relation to ever more present excessive use of information technology (e.g. smartphones), and so meaningfully complement existing programmes³ for supporting professionals to help shape healthy behaviours and the well-being of all students.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight everyday resistance as a meaningful component of pedagogical work in student dormitories. Therefore, it seems sensible to support counsellors in their pedagogical approaches that support flexibility, reflexivity, and the ethical use of institutional authority to shape supportive and inclusive dormitory environments for all students.

Ethical Statement

The research was carried out following ethical standards for pedagogical research; it was approved by the Faculty of Education, University of Ljubljana Ethics Commission.

3 One such programme is the Ministry of Health co-funded programme "Networking and Professional Support for Programs Aimed at Addressing Addiction and Substance Abuse" (Ministry of Health of the Republic of Slovenia, 2026).

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to providing for anonymity of research participants but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Disclosure Statement

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

When preparing this article, the authors did not use AI-assisted technologies. The authors accept full responsibility for the content and integrity of the publication.

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