

# ČO SA MÔŽEME NAUČIŤ OD ÚČASTNÍKOV PARTICIPAČNÉHO VÝSKUMU? REFLEXIE ZO ŠTÚDIÍ O BEZDOMOVCOCH

## WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM PARTICIPANTS IN PARTICIPATIVE RESEARCH? REFLECTIONS FROM STUDIES ON HOMELESS MEN<sup>80</sup>

KOSTRZYŃSKA MAŁGORZATA

Department of Social Pedagogy, University of Lodz, Poland

translation: Magdalena Machcińska-Szczepaniak

### Abstrakt

*Základom tohto príspevku je jedna z otázok, ktorá je predmetom záujmu konferencie, a to: ako vzdelávať ľudí pre výkon sociálnej práce? Podľa môjho názoru jednou možnou odpoveďou, aj keď to znie banálne, ale je základom pre akúkoľvek prácu s človekom – vzdelávanie v sociálnej práci by malo byť založené na skúsenostiach zo sprevádzania ich prijímateľov s jasným odkazom na osobné reflexie. Prijímatelia sú tí, pre ktorých sú tieto aktivity určené, a sú najlepšími expertami ich vlastných životných situácií.*

*Príspevok reflektuje výsledok práce dvoch rokov strávených sprevádzaním ľudí bez domova zotrávajúcich mimo systém sociálnej pomoci a prebývajúcich na uliciach mesta.*

*Pochopenie odkazu ľudí bez domova v súvislosti s aktivitami v oblasti sociálnej práce si vyžaduje dotknutie sa troch sfér. Po prvé pochopiť proces stávania sa bezdomovcom, čo v sebe kombinuje množstvo transformácií identity. Po druhé odhaliť špecifické oblasti v každodennej praxi, v ktorej sa systém pomoci navrhnutý pre ľudí bez domova ukázal neúspešný v dosahovaní vytýčených cieľov. Tretia etapa, dokončenie analýzy, vychádza z praxe sociálno-pedagogických aktivít sociálneho pracovníka a poskytuje vedomosti, ktoré sú nesporné, pretože vychádzajú z každodenných skúseností a reflexií účastníkov výskumu.*

### Kľúčové slová

*Bezdomovecťvo, identita, biografická trajektória, sociálna inklúzia, sociálna exklúzia, sociálno-pedagogická perspektíva.*

### Abstract

*The basis of this article is one of the questions underlying the subject of interest of the conference, namely: how to educate people to perform social work? In my opinion, one possible answer, although it sounds trite, is the basis for any action taken with another man – the education to perform social work should be based on the experience resulting from accompanying its recipients with a clear reference to a personal reflections. The recipients are those for whom these activities are designed and who are also the best judges of their own life situation.*

*The article is the result of over two years spent on accompanying the homeless men remaining outside the system of social assistance and residing on the streets of the city.*

*Comprehending the message of the homeless related to the activities in the field of social work requires touching three spheres. Firstly, understanding the process of becoming a homeless that is combined with a variety of identity transformations. Secondly, revealing specific areas in everyday practice in which the assistance system proposed to the homeless turns out not to fulfill its goals. The third stage, completing the analysis, is a proposition derived from practicing the premises for social-pedagogical activities of a social worker, thus providing knowledge that is indisputable, because it comes from everyday experiences and reflections of the study participants.*

### Key words

*Homelessness, identity, biographical trajectory, social inclusion, social exclusion, social-pedagogical perspective.*

<sup>80</sup> Parts of this text have been published in the article by Kostrzyńska M. (2010) *In what way does the world of “the others” become the world of “theirs”?* Praca Socjalna” No. 4, pp. 54-68.

Časť tohto textu bola publikovaná v publikácii Kostrzyńska M. (2010) *In what way does the world of “the others” become the world of “theirs”?* Praca Socjalna” No. 4, pp. 54-68.

## Introduction

Various paths lead a person to homelessness. They also reveal the mechanisms governing the process of gradual "becoming" a homeless (reaching the state of homelessness), the consequence of which is being integrated into the world of the homeless (originally the "strangers") and then recognizing it as the world of "theirs". Homelessness is set, by the homeless themselves, opposite to the "economic prosperity", identified with a "sense of loneliness," and linked to the "strange world" created by the "others".

In order to understand the message and the "lesson" that comes from the experience of homeless persons, one should begin with an attempt to get familiarized with the changes in the identity of a human being that is becoming more and more homeless. Only then one can approach Their perception of reality.

### 1. Identity transformation of a person becoming more and more homeless

The process of reaching the state of homelessness is presented in this text through the prism of the changes in a given individual concerning his or her current life circumstances. The consequence of these changes is that such individual physically finds himself or herself in the world "outside the home" (on the street, with short-term stays at the premises belonging to other people). This act of entering into the life "outside the home" is a symbolic moment marking the beginning of the process of becoming homeless – joining "the world of the homeless" and being perceived by others, once "theirs", as a "Stranger", because "Homeless".

Joining the "world of the homeless" gradually leads to recognizing them as "Theirs" and oneself as a member of this group and this world<sup>81</sup>. The immediate event introducing an individual into the world of the homeless is a critical decision (taken by the person herself or himself or by someone else).

Defining oneself as a homeless seems to be the opening stage of the process of becoming homeless in full sense of this word. An analysis of the experiences of the homeless "after closing the door" reveals the complexity of this process, which from defining oneself as a homeless leads such human being to joining into the world of the homeless. This in turn results in the changes in social reactions to a homeless and his or her redefinition of the boundaries of the world lived by such person, introducing a clear division between "theirs" and the "others."

Further reflections on the identity transformation will focus on self-presentation of the homeless in various individual roles, "the normal" and "the homeless", which make the basis for any action taken by the homeless, and therefore should form the grounds for the action undertaken by social workers towards the homeless .

---

<sup>81</sup> The existence of the world of "theirs" (the homeless) in contrast to the world of "the others" (the non-homeless) seems to be similar to the concept of social worlds introduced into literature by A. Strauss (1975).

"(...) the world (...) is an agglomeration of people related by their communication, i.e. a specific universe of a discourse. Regardless of whether its members are close in the spatial dimension or not, they participate in substantial acts of symbolic exchange, and thus they share a certain perspective in the perception of reality" (Denzin, Lindesmith, Strauss, 1975: 469).

## Self-presentation of a homeless person as "the normal" / "the homeless"<sup>82</sup>

Self-presentation of a homeless involves creation of his or her own image. It includes working on how such person is perceived and on the social identity – in order to properly influence the social categorization of himself or herself.<sup>83</sup>

A person, who has become homeless, carries out the self-presentation in the new situation by choosing one of the two symbolically available roles – "the normal" and "the homeless".<sup>84</sup> The criterion for differentiating the self-presentation is the *degree of meeting the expectations of the society attributed to fulfilling a particular social role*.

My research shows that any person entering the path leading to homelessness represents originally the self-presentation of "the normal". In the first stage of their homelessness, such people are not different in their appearance from other people, i.e. the "non-homeless". In principle, it is not possible to recognize them as "typical homeless persons." These are homeless people with the self-definition of homeless people, but they do not fulfill the specific social standards resulting in the social classification into the category of the homeless. While the state of homelessness sustains, they may stick to the role of "the normal", taking care of their appearance and the identity of the "normal", or they may gradually fall into the role of "the homeless", thus fitting into the category of a homeless person recognized as such by the others and meeting the social expectations associated with that category. The time between the self-presentation as "the normal" and the self-presentation as "the homeless" can be called, following the studied persons, "**the period of suspension**." Then, the person is already homeless, but still remains closer to the world of "the non-homeless" than the world of "theirs". He or she is therefore "suspended" between the two worlds.

According to the concept of social stigma by E. Goffman (2005), homeless people presenting themselves as "the normals" will be a group of discreditable stigma bearers, while those assuming the role of "the homeless" – a group of discredited individuals.

Discreditable homeless persons (in the role of "the normal") are those who believe that their otherness is neither known, nor immediately recognizable.

On the other hand, the discredited homeless in the role of "the homeless" make a group of stigma bearers considering their otherness as a characteristic which is *a priori* known by others or immediately recognizable.

The homeless in the role of "the homeless" – in scope of their appearance – fit into the category of a homeless man existing in the society, where "(...) *it is generally accepted that*

---

<sup>82</sup> Identity in this sense is not synonymous to a social role, but rather "a repertoire of roles and as such a repertoire of partial identities" (Berger, 1963: 105), as each undertaken role carries a specific personal identity. The actor has to take care of the compliance of the impression it evokes in the audience with personal qualities carried by the role he or she performs, which are somehow imposed on the person. The individual has therefore a lot of statuses, thus taking up a lot of social roles, and - consequently - many identities. He or she must systematically confirm, update individual identities, which requires him or her to take interactions in specific contexts, with specific "others". Considering the processual nature of identity it is worth emphasizing its active and passive nature. It is impossible to speak of 'holding' a certain identity, but rather of its continuous production - "in fact I do not have <an identity > - what we see are simply the ways in which I am identified (passive aspect) and I identify (active aspect)" (Ardener, 1992: 23).

<sup>83</sup> According to the concept of social stigma by Erving Goffman, the classification of another person takes place already upon the first meeting, during superficial contact, which is based on the most prominent features of the person subject to classification. Such person is classified to a certain category and is expected to behave in a certain way that is related to the above-mentioned features natural for a given category. Thus, that person is given a virtual social identity. When, on entering into interactions with that person, his or her actual social identity is revealed, a striking difference between the previously given virtual identity and the disclosed actual identity is also manifested. This difference between the two is referred to as the stigma. It occurs when a person's real qualities are different (usually in a negative way) from the characteristics listed into the category that a person was originally classified to. The stigma is, therefore, a kind of representation of a person through his or her negative features (Goffman, 1979; after: Gulczyńska, 2007).

<sup>84</sup> To make the actual atmosphere of the described phenomena closer to the Reader, the text was supplemented with the expressions taken directly from the speech of the study subjects (after Strauss - "in vivo codes") (1975) – they are marked in the text with quotation marks and italics.

*the homeless must be dirty, just in some rags etc. And the society sees people as such" (N7)<sup>85</sup>, presenting themselves as "someone from the social margin, the Beelzebub (...)" (N2).*

The attributes of the homeless **assuming the role of "the homeless"** are their clothes and their self-inflicted identification with a group of homeless people in the same role as well as being deprived of the items symbolically connected with the life led by the "normals" such as a mobile phone.

On the other hand, **a homeless in the role of "a normal"** rejects the attributes of the role of "a homeless" (and thus also being included in such socially recognized category)<sup>86</sup>. Defending himself or herself against the self-presentation as "a homeless", such person avoids others manifesting the self-presentation as "the homeless", as well as social institutions stereotypically associated with the homeless. This avoidance becomes a kind of an identity policy tactic. And all of this not to confirm that he or she belongs to "theirs" based on being with them.

The actions described above are a manifestation of the fight of a person to remain "normal", in the symbolic world, which seems to confirm his or her status as a discreditable homeless. Avoiding the situations of being identified with the discredited persons is expressed in the attempts to emphasize one's own otherness from this category of the homeless.

Hence, the homeless performing the role as "the normal" do not use the term "we – the homeless" identifying themselves in such way with other homeless people. Instead, they make a distinct group in an attempt to – at all costs – keep the identity they had had prior to becoming homeless, while any contact with homeless people choosing the role of "the homeless" could negate it. They avoid identifying with "them", at the same time expressing a negative attitude towards "them".

A homeless in the role of "a normal" maintains therefore the position located "outside" the world of "the true" homeless, i.e. those in the role of "the homeless" who are the discredited<sup>87</sup>. He or she criticizes the homeless for their lack of activity, for their inaction. This aversion expressed towards the behavior and appearance of the homeless also results from the fact that the homeless in the role of "the normal" (as they say) "get bammed because of these homeless." This is related to a negative opinion, a stereotype, causing certain social responses, which the person in the role of "the normal" wants to avoid.

Building the self-presentation of "a normal" – in order to maintain the identity for which the reference is the world of the majority, namely "the normal" – can probably lead to such public reactions of this world that induce the inclusion of a homeless person acting as "a normal" to the world which he or she tries to avoid – the "world of the homeless." It turns out that the society, unable to make a clear categorization of that person and adopt the typical pattern of action towards such individual, responds to him or her in a way making that person assume the attributes characteristic for the role of "the homeless".

---

<sup>85</sup> Respective symbols were assigned to the quoted statements of the study subjects. Every quotation, for the sake of anonymity, is marked with one of the following symbols: N1, N2, N3, ..., thus denoting the specific narrator. The researcher is marked with the symbol X. I am aware of the fact that such method may seem far from the understanding perspective adopted by me during the research, however, it proved to be the best solution to avoid – on the one hand – referring to the study subjects by false names (I did not want to resort to such method because of strong relationships with the study subjects) and, on the other hand, denoting them by the use of the nicknames, which might be regarded as pejorative and, as such, lead to forming in advance the Reader's opinion on a particular person.

<sup>86</sup> Similar findings from the studies conducted among the homeless were shown by M.Oliwa-Ciesielska who presented the homeless as a group of people with different or - in fact - lacking certain attributes specific to the rest of the society (for example, the attribute of mobility – a homeless "being a busy person meets randomly each element, but with none of them forms permanent, family, local ties (...)" (Simmel, 1975; after: Oliwa-Ciesielska, 2004.

<sup>87</sup> This seems to be related to the phenomenon described by H.Kubicka of double social exclusion concerning the homeless. First, they are excluded from a wider group of people possessing a house, then they express isolation and unwillingness to belong to the world of the homeless (Kubicka, 2007).

## **2. Social work through the eyes of a homeless man – confrontation of the selected theoretical assumptions of the social assistance system and the practice of their functioning**

The above-described methods of self-presentation of the homeless are inextricably linked to the actions – on the part of social workers – that are addressed to the homeless.

The homeless identify the received assistance with the institution called in Polish MOPS (Municipal Center of Social Assistance), which in their view is an institution from which one "can get something" (N1). This "something" is on the one hand rather vague, and on the other, impossible to predict as for the exact form that it will take. MOPS is perceived by the respondents dichotomously – as an institution that "gives and saves", but also as an institution "bristled" with official issues that are often insurmountable for the homeless.

The way of referring to the employees representing MOPS (mostly women) – so common among the homeless – as "the chicks from MOPS", "freebie givers" or "women – babysitters" indicates the negative range of meanings connected with them, as confirmed by my observations.

### **2.1 Expectations of aid institutions**

The entities somewhat responsible for the self-presentation are considered to be the institutions established to help in the process of social inclusion of the homeless.

*"Shoot, maybe these offices they will look somehow in a different way... at the homeless. Because not every homeless person has to be, you know, like they describe such person... I mean there are different homeless right ... One takes care of oneself, another does not, well, it is different ... And I think that I can even sleep on the floor on the ground, right, but it is my personal duty to take care of my personal hygiene, you know, the cleanness... This is not like this that I am homeless, I must be a slob, scruffy right... Well today I haven't shaved so well myself, because I had no time so, right,... Well, but such as some come here... IT IS TERRIBLE FOR ME. I mean, you know ... When one homeless, the other, the third, the tenth does so, doesn't care about the looks, dirty, sloppy, then wherever a man shows up at the office, and the officer sees this homeless man there on the street, right... And then I will come or another to arrange something ... Well, he will say well: "Slobs the homeless." Well, I cannot really help it..."(N3)*

Stereotyping of social perception can cause **unification of the ways of designing aid schemes**, which increases the risk of their inadequacy. And yet, as the homeless point out "each and every one differs from another. You could say that we are sailing on the same boat – the homelessness, but each one of us has one's own purpose ... "(N4)

It also appears that a homeless acting as "a normal" in a sense loses as opposed to those who perfectly fall into the role enforced on them by the society as "dirty, smelly, unshaven" (N1), consistent with the stereotype of the homeless. Since a person is kempt and does not look homeless, he or she does not need such assistance that is offered to a "textbook" homeless. This paradox results in a situation where a homeless man comes to the conclusion that it is not worth trying, it is not worth taking care of himself or herself, because really there are no benefits from it, he or she is not even able to take advantage of the assistance offered to the homeless (because he or she "does not look" homeless).

*"I talked to a sister ...there is in X street... there are Mother Theresa nuns... There are such homeless... real homeless that do not want to stay on the shelter, because he does not suit there, because he likes to for example drink... because they do not want to keep*

*there people who are physically capable and look neat. I was there, cross my heart. I talked to a sister.... Sir... you are capable of working... ...I we don't need you... why you can go to work, earn, for a month, and get a flat for yourself.... We take those from the margin, that lie in the street, stinky, with gangrene in their legs.... lousy, dirty.... And there is nothing wrong going on with you... you are clean, neat... But sister... I say, here I would like to stay for a while.... It's not possible "(N4)*

It can be said that this is the **paradox of institutionalized charity**, i.e. the situation of not meeting the expectations attributed to the homeless causes that they cannot benefit from aid institutions.

The social assistance institutions helping the homeless use the definition of "the one who most needs help," which is very different from the definition coined by the homeless people themselves. According to them, a person in need is the one that comes and asks for help, while from the perspective of the institution it is the one who "*lies in the passage way of a gate, smelly, lousy, dirty (...)*" (N4).

The situation presented above shows the lack of specific support measures aimed at the homeless acting as "the normal", which in this period of their life when they have such self-presentation could help them return to the old balance. The agencies working with homeless people offer them help, but only when the homeless already present themselves as "the homeless" and so when they meet the stereotypical image of being homeless and, often, it turns out that the aid came already too late. Therefore, the homeless acting as "the normal" and not obtaining the support from the institution receive it from the homeless in the role of "the homeless" who show them how to "survive" and where and how to seek help, and finally what to do to get it. They offer them a broadly defined social support.<sup>88</sup> In this way, the homeless in the role of "the normal" get closer to their "guides" who "drag" them into the world of "theirs".

These mechanisms present a homeless on the one hand as a person with "taught" helplessness, and on the other hand, as a "private entrepreneur" (as they call it themselves), an empowered one, and thus organized to ensure the survival on the street.

## ***2.2 Self-presentation and the change in scope of the social reaction***

The self-presentation of the homeless assuming a specific role affects **the change of the social reaction** of "the others". Adoption – on the part of the homeless – of the role as "the normal", or "the homeless" leads to a certain reaction they receive from the society, which in turn results in a certain reaction on the part of the homeless themselves. This mechanism was explained by Goffman (2005: 36) who argued that "the expressiveness of the individual (and thus the ability to make an impression) is composed of two entirely different types of symbolic activity: the impression that this person *gives* and *gives off*". This "performance of an individual on the social scene" turns out to be asymmetric – the individual is perfectly able to control the transmitted message, but has no impact on its reception by the interaction partner.<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>88</sup> Social support is a "kind of social interaction undertaken by one or two parties in a problem situation in which there occurs an exchange of informative, emotional or instrumental nature (...), existing in the exchange system: the helping person - the person receiving support" (Kawula, 1996). The support may be of emotional nature (it involves messages directed to people, such as "you are loved," "we like you"), valuing one (messages like "you're important to me"), instrumental one (providing assistance, rendering services), or informative one (giving advice, information).

<sup>89</sup> The phenomenon of a stigma is very strongly associated with the way of thinking of both the normals and the stigmatized concerning their image in their own eyes and in someone else's eyes and what the relationships between them should look like. "Even when an individual with the stigma is told that he or she is a human being like any other, such person is simultaneously informed that it would be unwise to conceal the stigma or let down the group such person belongs to. Thus, such person learns that he or she is like everybody else, and also

"(...) so people define (a homeless) marginally ... based on the appearance. When a man is dressed normally and so on he looks like every man and can talk and look them in the eye to every person... "(N4)

"(...) Because when it is a homeless and he is more or less clean you know soo ... dressed decently... he doesn't stink, people approach him differently. But of course when that someone will come ... smelly, lousy... well ... people AVOID... avoid such people. He may be homeless, be anything, but when he looks like we have just said, well, people will surely avoid ... for sure. Because I'll tell you that I myself would be damn scared if I saw this guy (N2)

There is therefore a clear link between the type of the self-presentation assumed by the homeless and the change of the social reaction of "the others".

At first, in the case when a homeless acting as "a normal" is not recognized on the streets as "a homeless" (does not look like "a homeless"), the social reaction is positive.

"(...) When I have no way to wash myself at some friends' accomodation, I go to Łagiewniki, you know, I take a towel and soap to bathe there. Because what other can I do... I AM NOT GOING TO GO BY TRAM AND SMELL. (4s) Sometimes I do not know ... so I'm thinking ... these people know that I'm homeless, or not ... just looking at these people sometimes ... I do not know ... Well, that once there, you know, I had control of documents, because once at night I was coming back a few times so ... well, the police ... but towards me, you know, I cannot say, they were polite ... soo ... homeless homeless ...so "And where do you live?" And I say, sir, on the grass. Well, as you see on my forehead I do not have written that I'm homeless, but in MY ID THERE IS NO PERMANENT RESIDENCE REGISTRATION. You should see, I say, that I'm homeless. "And where are you going?" Because I was just at night there and had control of my documents. Sir, I'm going anywhere ... to some stairwell... "(N3)

The homeless, wanting to "make the situation clear", use the tactics of "admitting to homelessness", which is followed by a distinct redefinition on the part of the interaction partner with a simultaneous change of the attitude presented by the members of the society (from positive to negative).

"N5: Even when the people treated... as yet on that Station... on this Fabryczna Station I was ..., well, they looked ... you're homeless? I say ... I've always said ... so I am homeless... and they already treated me differently ... because as they did not know it was a different talk, and they treated me differently, well, and as there we talked and I said that I was homeless, I at once I noticed that ...

X: How did this treatment change?

N5: Well for the worse, such as a worse man, well worse ... such of a worse kind...

X: ... and how was it manifested?

N5: So, even in the conversation ... it already was ... they began to use other words as they talked to me ...earlier normally, and they as they found out that I was homeless and they began to swear, gibe at me... right away I could feel it... hear it... even as it was once, well they reckoned with my opinion, when I said, that it is white it was so .... and then when they learned... what are you f... saying... little do you know ... (...) so always they normally treated until they learned I was homeless. So maybe I unnecessary in such conversations I confessed that I was homeless, but I wanted to be honest in some way for

---

that he or she is not, and the people expressing such opinions are not in agreement as to with which of these attitudes he or she should identify more strongly. This contradiction and irony are such person's fate" (Goffman, 2005).

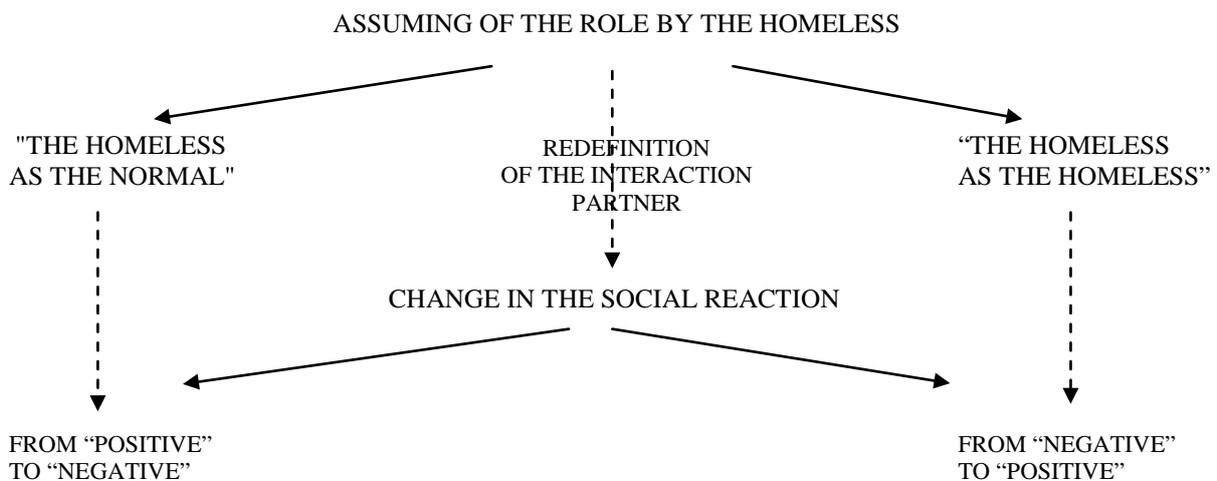
*these people, and so that they know who I am and whom they talk to. Well, as I admitted that I was homeless, well, it was just an about 90-degrees change in their character and they began to treat well differently "(N5)*

As demonstrated, the members of the society attempt to degrade a person in order to "lead" such individual into the role of a homeless person.

On the other hand, while the homeless acting as "the homeless" generally face the negative social reaction, sometimes when taking up an interaction with "the others" they can experience the change of their (i.e. the members of the society) attitude from negative to positive, when – upon closer acquaintance with the homeless – they find that " *he or she is not as bad as those homeless*" (N1)

*"Although some well ... some at first glance, they treat me like they look down on me . But when they talk to me they somehow take trust to me and sympathy. Soo ... jus as well as here in this administration office... I went to there ... A HOMELESS THIS ... and when I went and I talked I talked I talked, well, see, I arranged the transportation, and furniture and everything. Well, I somehow gained their trust. Of course I immediately said that I had been in a correctional facility, that I'm homeless and I would like to ask for some trust ... to give the man a chance ... Well so ... after all you cannot immediately condemn a man, shit, to death ... "(N2)*

Figure 1. **The relationship between the role of the homeless and the consequent social response**



We are dealing here with yet another paradox, revealing the lack of idea, on the part of the society, concerning the social reaction towards homelessness. It turns out that social reactions to the homeless acting as "the normal" express the expectation of their adopting the symbolic attributes of the world of the homeless, while the homeless representing the identification with the social category of the homeless are expected to manifest the behavior representative for the world of "the normals". This paradox translates into the quality of the assistance obtained by the homeless in the process of social inclusion. The natural consequence is, therefore, **"the difficulty in reading out the expectations of the society"** towards the homeless and consistently to this **"the lack of confidence on the part of the homeless."**

Perhaps because of this, in the interactions with the homeless, a representative of the world of "the normals" is exposed to the **tactics of "putting the society to the test."** The

homeless check the representatives of the society to establish whether or not they apply the degradation tactics to bring the homeless down to the role of a homeless person. When it is found that the degradation does not take place, the homeless allows for establishing the interaction at the level of personal identity<sup>90</sup>, as indicated by the statement of N2:

*"I was even surprised at you, that you came here, even not... then you didn't know that I did time... But later when we sat and talked... another would have jumped up and run to the door... And you didn't... and you didn't... I told you so everything ...so I can say I told you my whole life... Because I am not ashamed of it. Because as I see it... you don't want to tolerate... no or me... don't tolerate and that's it. And when I, I don't know, well... in some way when you like me, so you will tolerate me and you will talk to me and you will not avoid me... YOU WILL NOT AVOID ME and I, you know, come to other people with open attitude. But when some people are different than I am so just excuse me... sorry ... you don't want to like me, YOU DON'T WANT TO DEAL WITH ME, SO DON'T DEAL WITH ME..... God forbid ... "(N2)*

The analysis of the change in scope of social reactions depending on the role assumed by the homeless and the social expectations associated with it demonstrates the validity of the statement expressed by Goffman: "Whatever you do, you lose. Do nothing – the others will win"(2005: 63)

### **3. The premises for the practice of education in the field of social work**

The social worker acts as an intermediary, or a spokesperson, in relations between the homeless and the institutions, to make them more balanced. The spokesperson explains the homeless and their reality, accompanying and representing them in their mutual relations, assisting them in the recovery of their steering control in the given area of life. Such person is therefore the representative of the homeless in the world of the society, but at the same time also serves as the representative of the society in the world of the homeless.

As an "oriented" spokesperson I was introduced into the world of the rules binding among the homeless (for example, a special way of knocking on the door to be recognized as one of "theirs"), but I also worked out other rules of my cooperation with the homeless, which were spread by the homeless among themselves without my participation in this process (for example, that I do not give them money, I do not buy them cigarettes or alcohol). The spokesperson becomes the "engine" stimulating the homeless to work, arousing their motivation – initially to do just "anything".

It turns out that the presence of a person acting as an intermediary has a positive effect on the way a homeless person is perceived by the society. Its members begin to look differently at such person, forgetting about the stereotypes, or at least opening the eyes to their inadequacy.

However, if there is no such intermediary, *"then it is difficult to get things arranged... in the offices they do not understand nothing, they do not understand ... and so ..."* (N1). Moreover, the way the homeless are treated in different institutions varies depending on whether a homeless is alone or has the intermediary "behind" himself or herself. Towards the intermediary *"one cannot act so bluntly"* – in contrast to acting towards the homeless.

---

<sup>90</sup> E.Goffman (1979) introduces a division in the concept of identity, distinguishing the ego-identity, i.e. private self-identification unavailable for others during the interaction; personal identity, i.e. external self-presentation shown "outside" and shared with people close to an individual; and social identity, representing our ideas about who we are and who we want to be to which everyone has access, even strangers (after: Granosik, 2007).

The presence of the spokesperson draws attention in the offices where such person appears – trying to solve the problems of the homeless – or comes to accompany them. I personally experienced with the study subjects how successive officials came up to us to see what is happening, who I actually am and how it is possible that I do not act as a representative of some institution. During the subsequent "visits" at the offices we were shown in as "acquaintances" – everybody knew exactly who we are. The presence of the spokesperson/intermediary sometimes also evokes the positive perception of the homeless by the society. People start to "look differently" at such person, forgetting about the stereotypes, or at least they open their eyes to their inadequacy.

*"N3: If I remember well you called this guy concerning the job ...? He will think about it again ...*

*X: ... yes ...*

*N3: ... hehe ... hmm .... Well ... now I know where it is and I think I will go there by myself. Even though I would prefer to go there with you ... ha... I rather go with you, because the fact that people looking different at you, and secondly that somehow I do not know ... some kind of positive energy you are emanating, or something like that, that other people pay attention differently. And so I... they will look that I am TOTOOED, even in the eyes it can be seen. Well .... and they may be a little afraid "*

## **Conclusions**

Any action taken by a social worker – an intermediary between the world of "theirs" (the homeless) and the world of "strangers" – should therefore embrace an individual, structural and interactive level of human life. Working on a structural level, aimed at social inclusion, should include not only working with the homeless themselves, but also with the society. It should involve creating job opportunities, and hence, a chance for the homeless to earn their living and housing needs. On the other hand, the work at the interactive level would focus on being with the homeless people. This primarily boils down to trying to balance the relationship between a homeless and a social worker accompanying him or her. In this relationship, there occurs a specific transfer, an exchange and mutual participation, and so it results in supporting the development of the homeless. To accompany means to be with him or her, be near, be close enough in order to, at a particular time, be "useful". However, this time must be clearly indicated by the interested parties themselves – i.e. the homeless – according to their own needs, rather than as a result of the social worker's perception concerning his or her presence in their world.

The above analysis of the transformation of identity, and the consecutive attempt to confront the theoretical assumptions with a homeless man's everyday life, and finally, the presentation of only a slice of the premises emerging from the research evidence for the socio-pedagogical activities, point clearly to the need to listen intensely to what a homeless has to say; the homeless as the expert and the best guide showing others around the explored reality. The homeless are the experts, because they themselves experience every day their daily routine. While educating people for social work, attention should be paid directly to these experiences, and the lessons should be taken exclusively from the addressees of the undertaken action. They reveal clearly the specific areas, resulting from the daily practice, in which the proposed homeless assistance system turns out not to fulfill its goals. What is more, they themselves are most painfully affected by the consequences of the inconsistency of the assistance offers. All these aspects lead to a situation in which one of the best solutions in the area of social work education becomes the use of the undisputed knowledge, coming from the

reflection of the study subjects, thus leading to a common ground for the action to be developed by a social worker.

Perhaps this is how the homeless are trying to establish themselves in the society, to settle in it (colonize it), so that, over time, perhaps also colonize the society (Goffman, 2005: 63). Maybe then it will be possible to introduce into practice the idea that the most important goal and task of any social worker is to become unnecessary for the client...

#### **Literature:**

- Ardener, E., *Tożsamość i utożsamianie* [in:] Sytuacja mniejszościowa i tożsamość, Z. Mach, A. Paluch, Prace Socjologiczne, 1992, z. 15, nr 1029, Kraków, p. 21-43.
- Berger, P. L., *Tożsamość jako problem socjologii wiedzy* [w:] *Problemy socjologii wiedzy* (red.) Niżnik J., Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1985.
- Declerck, P., *Rozbitkowie. Rzecz o paryskich kłoszardach. (Les naufragés. Avec les clochards de Paris)*. Warszawa: Warszawskie Wydawnictwo Literackie MUZA SA, 2004.
- Goffman, E., *Piętno. Rozważania o zranionej tożsamości. (Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity)*. Gdańsk: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, 2005.
- Granosik, M., Wykluczony Inny – fenomenologia (po)rozumienia. (Excluded Other – phenomenology of understanding). In: E. Marynowicz-Hetka (ed.). *Pedagogika społeczna. Podręcznik akademicki, tom I. (Social pedagogy. An academic textbook)*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2007.
- Gulczyńska, A., Zagrożenia rozwoju społeczno-kulturowego – przykład wrastania społecznego nastoletniej młodzieży w kontekście sąsiedztwa. (The risks of social-cultural development – example of social rooting of teenagers in the context of the neighborhood). In: E. Marynowicz-Hetka (ed.) *Pedagogika społeczna. Podręcznik akademicki, tom I. (Social pedagogy. An academic textbook)*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2007.
- Kostrzyńska, M., *W jaki sposób świat „obcych” staje się światem „swoich”? (How does the world of “strangers” becomes the world of “theirs”?)*. Praca Socjalna, 2010a, 4, 54-68.
- Kostrzyńska, M., *Ścieżki dochodzenia do bezdomności. Rekonstrukcja procesu na przykładzie badań biografii bezdomnych. (The paths leading to becoming homeless. The process reconstruction on the example of homeless biographies research)*. In: Elżbieta Dubas, Wojciech Świtalski (eds.) *Uczenie się z biografii Innych. (Learning from Others biography)*. Łódź: Wydawnictwo UŁ, 2010b, p. 157-173.
- Kubicka, H., *Bezdomność – przykład zagrożenia rozwoju społeczno-kulturowego przez stopniową utratę związków z innymi a instytucjonalne możliwości i granice włączania społecznego*, w: *Pedagogika społeczna. Podręcznik akademicki, tom I*, Marynowicz-Hetka E., Warsaw, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2007.
- Lindesmith, A.R., Strauss, A.L., Denzin, N.K., *Social Psychology*. Illinois, 1975.
- Nózka, M., *Włóczęgostwo. Zjawisko społeczna i interwencja socjalna. (Vagabondage. Social phenomenon and social intervention)*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ, 2006.
- Oliwa-Ciesielska, M., Człowiek bezdomny jako „inny”. Możliwości uczestnictwa społecznego. (Homeless person as the „other”. The possibilities of social participation). In: Ewa Kantowicz, Andrzej Olubiński (eds.) *Działanie społeczne w pracy socjalnej na progu XXI wieku. (Social activity in social work on the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century)*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Edukacyjne Akapit, 2003.
- Oliwa-Ciesielska, M., *Piętno nieprzypisania. Studium o wyizolowaniu społecznym bezdomnych. (Stigma of unattribution. Study about social isolation of the homeless)*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2004.

#### **Kontakt:**

Mgr Małgorzata Kostrzyńska  
Katedra Pedagogiki Społecznej (Department of Social Pedagogy)  
Wydział nauk o Wychowaniu (Faculty of Educational Sciences)  
Uniwersytet Łódzki w Łodzi (University of Lodz)  
ul. Pomorska 46/48, 91-408 Łódź  
Polska  
tel: +48 42 665 50 50  
fax: +48 42 665 50 54  
E-mail: [gosia\\_wujcicka@poczta.onety.pl](mailto:gosia_wujcicka@poczta.onety.pl)