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Counselling for People of Marginalised Groups – Streetworking

The aim of the article is to discuss streetworking as a specific form of help that pertains to social work, education and counselling. Streetworking targets individuals or groups who, for various reasons, do not want or are unable to use the traditional and institutional forms of support.

Locating the streetworking help in the concept of helping via offering, the author outlines the idea of streetworking, its goals, tasks and assumptions. The counselling offered in streetworking is described in the context of dialogue and liberal counselling. The description of streetworkers' activities includes enumeration of demands streetworkers must fulfil, and in particular personality features, competence, knowledge and counselling skills. The article presents in detail the offers of help and support addressed to specific marginalised groups, i.e. women and men who sell sex, psychoactive drugs addicts, street children and homeless people.

Key words: streetworking, outreach, marginalised groups, harm reduction, helping via offering, dialogue counselling, liberal counselling

Streetworking as an offer of help

Streetworking is a specific form of help and social, educational and counselling work that targets individuals or groups who, for various reasons, do not want or are unable to use the traditional and institutional forms of help and support.

Also called outreach, streetworking, may be defined as a form of help in which the streetworker (or 'street educator') actively seeks contact with his/her clients (or potential clients) in places they frequent. Streetworking is often referred to as 'social work in streets', 'a method to outreach' or 'street education', as it distinctly concerns clients who find themselves outside institutions that offer help and support. As one of the classic publications puts it,

streetworkers not only work in the offices of their institutions, but also try to establish direct contacts with the selected target groups in their private or occupational environments. The streetworkers' workplaces are usually locations

frequented by a given target group marginalised for some reason (Leopold, Steffan 1995, p. 68).

The main aim of streetworking is to support any social group which do not use institutional forms of help. Streetworkers bear in mind that the behaviour of the members of such groups may result from, for example, negative prior experience of institutionally offered help, lack of knowledge about the help-offering institutions, inability to visit such institutions or inadequate offers of help. Thus, streetworking may be an alternative to stationary programmes, either complementing what they offer or arranging other activities addressed to the same social groups.

The form of help described here is grounded in the philosophy of harm reduction (Zygałło 1998a). Marek Beniowski (1998, p. 2) defines harm reduction as *reduction of harm, injuries and wrongs*. The idea of harm reduction ensues from the assumption that it is impossible to fully eliminate all socially disapproved phenomena (e.g. drug abuse, prostitution). It is, however, possible to apply various measures to diminish the social and individual harm or the negative consequences of such phenomena. As Marek Zygałło (1998, p. 5) puts it: *Since we are not able to eradicate evil entirely, we must commence actions to minimize and reduce the harm. If we are aware of the harm, the actions to limit the harm appear natural*. For this reason, designing its helping offer, streetworking targets people who are most exposed to the results of harm in order to minimise it or to change their situation for the better.

The help streetworking offers can be conceptualised in the framework of helping via offering. Defining this notion, Robert Kwaśnica (1994, pp. 6-7) states that it is the person who benefits from help that decides whether or not such help is needed and beneficial for him/her. People decide on their own what to choose from a given offer of help and *which pieces of information presented to them they will use and in what way* (ibid., p. 7). The concept of help as an offering results from the belief that each individual lives in his/her own world and that, consequently, *s/he should constantly search, permanently attempt to understand the world and themselves* (ibid., p. 13). At the same time, Kwaśnica insists that if an individual needs help, *the help should consist in making such search possible for them (or facilitating it)* (ibid., p. 13). This is why helping via offering neither imposes any ready-made solutions nor presumes that a given solution is the most adequate and appropriate one. Discussing such help, Daria Zielińska-Pękał (2008, p. 168) suggests that it is crucial to avoid pressuring the person to whom the help is offered. She believes that the one offering help should signal willingness to help and, then, respect the supported person's decision whether and in what form the help should be accepted. Far from simply preventing people from committing mistakes, the helper can target both material and non-material problems, trying to, for example, change a person's negative self-image or perception of issues and mistakes. The help offered consists in communicating the helper's point of view to the advice- or help-seekers not in

making decisions for them or recommending to them solutions appropriate in a given situation.

Another important aspect of the offered help is obtaining consent to intervene in the world of the person who asks for it. R. Kwaśnica (ibid., p. 14) discusses two basic tenets relevant here. The first stipulates that counsellors have to accept that only the person who applies for help may authorize the helper's intervention through the very request for help. The other one instructs that if such authorisation does not take place, the helpers must refrain from intervention.

We may say that two models of help correspond to two attitudes towards others. In one of them help is offered only if authorised by the help-seeker, with the helper and the applicant agreeing on the scope, the form and the content of help. The supported person's will is central to this project, as – according to Kwaśnica – assistance is offered to *those who want it and who decide themselves who, how, to what extent and for how long will help them* (ibid., p. 14). In the other model, help is offered upon the counsellor's authorisation. Viewing the offer of help as a specific form of communication, the helper does not wait for a client's request and decides what kind of help should be offered and in what form it should come. The helper tries to avoid giving unambiguous advice or instructions: *Whether this type of communication will evolve into an offering authorised by a given person depends on this other person* (ibid., p. 14).

In order to prevent stigmatisation and exclusion of their clients from society, streetworkers favour self-authorised offering and address their offer to entire groups (cf. Leopold, Steffan 1995, pp. 68-69). Here, it is crucial that *a streetworker's actions should set off a specific 'avalanche effect' in a given target group, for example by fostering and supporting self-help initiatives* (ibid., p. 70). Thus, streetworking that targets a whole group may help integrate it, create bonds in it and build its common potential, which contributes to later self-help actions.

Another goal of streetworking is education pertaining particularly to prevention of social exclusion and health (e.g. prevention of HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, violence, sexual abuse, drug additions, etc.). Streetworking aims also to raise legal and social consciousness as well as to form awareness of effects that particular phenomena have.

Streetworking puts special emphasis on educating by the 'face-to-face' method, i.e. in direct contact with the beneficiaries of the help programme. With such priorities in view, streetworking tends to apply the counselling paradigm.

Specificity of counselling in streetworking

Assistance for marginalised groups addresses primarily their current situation and a given group's or individual's specific needs. Consequently, counselling is very often used here. Samuel Gladding (1996, pp. 7-8) proposes the following definition

of counselling: [counselling is] *a relatively short, interpersonal process of assisting people in solving their developmental and situational problems. The process may be defined as assistance in changing oneself.* In practice, it is a social activity which consists in one individual (the counsellor) giving advice, instructions, information, etc. to another individual who has some problems (the counselee); it is also an interpersonal interaction of a helping character (Kargulowa 2004, p. 206).

Professional counselling is not a spontaneous or random event although it may involve its participants' various emotional experiences and behaviours (ibid., p. 56). It is a rational activity purposefully designed to fulfil the intentions of those engaged in counselling. Kargulowa claims also that counselling is *improvement-oriented, as it aims to optimize personality traits and behaviour, i.e. to develop motivation, transform emotions, enrich the information resources, overcome the counselees' stereotypes and foster their reflectiveness and critical thinking* (ibid., p. 56). Counselling can aim to change one's self-esteem and self-image or perception of a given situation, to find solutions to one's current problems and difficulties, or to initiate a complete transformation and make one start a new life.

The task of counselling in streetworking is to assist people from the target groups in solving problems they face in new, insecure, risky or difficult situations:

In practice, as both individuals' unique personalities and their right to be somewhat incompetent are taken into account, counselling takes place as a partner dialogue in the course of which various aspects of the problems faced by individuals are analyzed (Kargulowa 1990, p. 148).

In the literature, this type of counselling is referred to as dialogue counselling. Such relationship calls for the counsellor's and the counselee's reflectiveness, as problems are to be solved by them both jointly in a partner dialogue (Kargulowa 2004, p. 206). This type of counselling is fundamental in streetworking. The counselee admits the streetworker into his/her world, describes the situation and reveals the problems s/he faces. Importantly, the counsellor must avoid giving 'good advice' as the situations of marginalised people are so diverse and complex that it is virtually impossible to find a single, unambiguous and effective solution. What may appear easily achievable to the streetworker may be irrelevant or unattainable to someone in need. Thus, there is no streetworking without an open dialogue and without looking at the problem 'with the counselee's eyes'.

Another type of counselling practised in streetworking is liberal counselling. In liberal counselling the counselee is given *mental comfort, a sense of security and acceptance. The counselee is also supported in finding his/her own way to change by methods which stimulate the development of 'inner' awareness and boost the courage to perceive the reality reflectively* (ibid., p. 207). One of the crucial principles of streetworking is to motivate and accompany the counselees in deciding when and how to change their lives. It entails supporting the streetworking targets in making choices and taking alternative actions as well as in seeking other forms of

support and help if needed. (cf. *Międzynarodowy przewodnik metodologiczny po streetworkingu na świecie* 2008, p. 19). In many situations, the counselees expect the counsellor to support them even if in his/her opinion their decisions are pointless or not viable. The help-seeker's judgement is, however, central to this kind of counselling.

The relation between streetworkers and their clients depends on a very delicate balance between specific goals and the freedom to choose ways of achieving them. It is unacceptable for a streetworker to decide for their clients or to exert pressure on them in order to enforce particular changes. In fact, the counsellor should propose the types of support which the marginalised or those at risk of marginalisation could actually accept. They should view this support as conducive to their individual development and inclusion and participation to social life (ibid., pp. 19-20). As we read in the *Międzynarodowy przewodnik*:

The goal of streetworking is to contribute to everyone's ability to find out their unique value and to feel that they can influence their own lives as well as make others aware of this. (...) Streetworking aims at restoring people's agency in controlling their situation, future and environment. Its aspiration is to have a person regain the power to create scenarios for his/her life (ibid., pp. 22-23).

The success of streetworking depends on many factors. The choice of the counselling form relies, among others, on how the target group is structured, what hierarchy it has, how hermetic it is, what particular problems it faces, what its specific needs are and to what degree it is socially excluded. In the case of youth or informal groups (such as yobs and street children), streetworking targeting entire groups or their leaders seems more efficient. In the case of drug users, the homeless or displaced people and women and men who sell sex, counselling seems to be a more effective form of support, particularly successful if offered in individual contact.

The streetworker as a counsellor

A streetworker may become both the first and the last link of the process of education, support and advice when all other forms of social aid have failed. A streetworker is also a 'bridge' that connects people who work or live in the street with social service workers. This is so because a streetworker offers help that consists of co-participation and establishes an alliance founded upon respect for individuals' right to decide for themselves, to be assured of confidentiality of information and to have their capacity for autonomy recognised (ibid., p. 43).

As Alicja Czerkawska (2004, p. 74) puts it: *each counsellor should have comprehensive knowledge, skills and capabilities*. People who work with the marginalised groups should meet particularly strict requirements. A streetworker may be asked for help in various circumstances, including very concrete matters and long-term

issues, 'trifling' problems and critical, very serious situations. This is why a streetworker's skills and personal qualifications are so important in their work. Justin Gaffrey distinguishes two categories of features a streetworkers should have (2002, pp. 11-12). In the first one (i.e. skills), he lists interpersonal communication, advisory competence, educational experience, ability to compile reports and evaluations, skilful time management, knowledge of the techniques of team and individual work, experience in work with marginalised groups, knowledge of social aid institutions, knowledge of psychology, sociology, law and health. The second category (i.e. personal features) includes a non-judgmental attitude, ability to listen to others, refraining from moralising, openness, patience, humility, sense of humour, enthusiasm and eagerness to work, ability to cope with stress, ability to act in difficult situations, clear understanding of personal and professional limits, versatility, adaptability and assertiveness. It is also important for a streetworker to be trustworthy, willing to help and discreet.

The streetworker's primary aim is to build contacts with representatives of very difficult target groups. To succeed, streetworkers should be convinced that they are doing the right thing and can make a difference. This is because in their work they often must repeatedly perform the same actions and friendly gestures before those in need first signal their willingness to cooperate. However, it is due to their persistence and patience that the work may bring about effects. Thus, a streetworker must be open, patient and able to inspire trust. Also, the ability to establish contact is very important, and that depends on understanding and accepting the client's situation. At the same time, a streetworker must avoid judging his/her clients, their situation and their decisions. A streetworker should help and educate, but by no means moralise. Depending on the type of group a streetworker works with, his/her gender may also prove important.

A person that does not show acceptance or at least tolerance of the group with which s/he is going to work cannot be a streetworker. Since the group should not regard the streetworker as an intruder, intuition and patience are very important when s/he enters the structures and hierarchies of a given community. A streetworker must penetrate the environment without transgressing the established limits. In the course of time, if the streetworker is accepted and his/her intentions endorsed, s/he gains recognition and stands the chance of cooperating with his/her clients. It is important for the streetworker to be able and to want to genuinely help and support people who trust him/her, to accompany the clients and to indicate possible solutions to the problem they face.¹ *The relation proposed by street educators requires their presence and involvement, participating in experience, formulating suggestions and mediation* (Międzynarodowy przewodnik... 2008, p. 23).

¹ Based on the material of the Homelessness Agenda Project – Standards of Active Return to the Labour Market at <http://www.ab.org.pl/?a=streetworker> 1, as of March 31, 2012.

In order to work efficiently with the marginalised groups and individuals, streetworkers must acquire professional knowledge about a range of phenomena (e.g. prostitution, drug abuse and street children), find out about the specificity of their working environment, and develop expertise in sex education, psychology, pedagogy, sociology, social aid, law and health education. A street worker must also be empathetic and able to cope with his/her own weaknesses and helplessness. A streetworker must know the techniques of social counselling (social aid and other forms of support for basic needs) and be able to provide psycho-social assistance. It is also useful to learn specific vocabularies and slangs, in particular terms for sexual behaviours and psychoactive substances (Dec, Trębińska 2004, p. 106).

The help via offering generates significant dilemmas. Streetworkers' work is particularly fraught with controversy when a person who in their opinion needs help refuses it for various reasons. It is difficult then to persuade the programme beneficiaries to accept a stranger and to win their trust. People who have experienced stigmatisation, abuse, rejection by their close ones and society are particularly distrustful towards strangers. Hunger, emotional or physical pain, loneliness or illness may cause behaviours implying that help is need, and yet a request for food or money does not mean that those asking are open and ready to accept a streetworker's help. Generally, they do not trust strangers. They often think that the streetworker will expect something in return for the help s/he provides.

Streetworkers must prove that they offer help without any hidden agenda. Rash or inconsiderate actions are often disastrously counterproductive. Only patience, humility and persistence can bring about the expected effects. Even if a person's situation is dramatic and seems to urge intervention, action must be taken deliberately and rely on the client's active participation and consent. Both parties must respect the principle of 'nothing about us without us'.

Importantly, streetworkers are mediators between the marginalised people or groups on the one hand and public and political institutions and actors on the other. Such role demands that streetworkers possess certain abilities and be ready to handle 'bureaucratic' tasks. They must also acquire some political insight and develop skills of influencing the public (Leopold, Steffan 1995, p. 70). This is because streetworkers are quite often 'spokespersons' for people and groups who live beyond the recognised social structures. They fight for their clients' equal opportunities, re-inclusion in social life and right to decide for themselves.

However, the decision about which strategy of help to choose depends on the streetworkers, their organisation, particular tasks, their own concept of help and the specific features of the environment or people with whom they work.

Recommendations for streetworking in various marginalised groups

Streetworking in the group of women and men who sell sex

The group of women and men who sell sex requires special methods and forms of help. Social attitudes towards prostitution and related phenomena have practically always entailed rejection and stigmatisation of the group and its behaviour. Women and men who sell sex are often marginalised, stigmatised, condemned and humiliated. Since they are as a rule refused assistance when they apply for it in social institutions, they often distrust traditional help-offering services. Many come from abroad: they do not know the language, have a rather vague legal status or stay in a given country illegally. Sometimes they do not know what help they can seek or where they could find it. In this group, individual counselling and other forms of streetworking should be adjusted to the clients' actual needs. This diversified group includes people who offer sex services on highways, access roads, streets, in border areas and in escort agencies.

Working in such groups, streetworkers:

- ◆ work with people who offer sex services of various nationalities, ages and genders,
- ◆ cooperate with social groups whose activities enhance the risk of HIV and sexually transmitted diseases,
- ◆ support people who want to withdraw from their job,
- ◆ help victims of human trafficking and those coerced into prostitution,
- ◆ offer mental support to people who experience work-related stress and to their families,
- ◆ offer counselling and make other forms of social aid available to the clients,
- ◆ impart knowledge about sexually transmitted diseases,
- ◆ promote the principles of safe sex and hygiene,
- ◆ impart information about the institutions which offer HIV tests and support HIV and AIDS patients (e.g., Consulting and Diagnostic Offices, The National AIDS Centre, NGO's such as The 'Be with Us' Association of Volunteers Against AIDS, 'Network Plus' National Network of HIV/AIDS Patients, The 'Solid Plus' Association, The 'Umbrella Programme' Centre for Prevention and Social Education, The 'TADA' Association for Health Promotion and Prevention of Social Risks, The 'Station Programme' Association For Children and Youth, The 'DA DU' Association of Volunteers),
- ◆ inform about the opportunities of institutional social aid,
- ◆ deliver medications, condoms and lubricants.

Streetworking in the group of drug users

In this group, harm reduction relies primarily on educating about harmfulness of drug abuse and safer methods of drug use as well as on informing about the medical substitute therapies. The beneficiaries of the streetworking harm reduction programmes are those experimenting with drugs, occasional drug users and drug addicts. Programmes of needle and syringe exchange are intended for intravenous drug addicts. Such programmes would not succeed without streetworking. Because in Poland drug use is penalised and drug users (especially intravenous drug users) marginalised and rejected, the non-institutional form of help is particularly significant. Intoxicated with drugs, addicts often fail to visit clinics, forget about therapy appointments or simply do not want to accept the offer of help. A possible alternative is provided by streetworking programmes of needle and syringe exchange implemented in locations frequented by drug users. The main goal of such programmes is to change the drug-related high-risk behaviours for safer ones.

Streetworking programmes of harm reduction are not in opposition to the existing prophylactic and therapeutic programmes. On the contrary, they complement the latter. They bring actual effects and, most importantly, are accepted by the psychoactive substance users. Working with addicts, streetworkers very often dispense information on safer drug-using techniques, the imperative to use sterile needles and syringes, the possible effects and symptoms of drug abuse, the symptoms of overdosing and measures to be taken when overdosing occurs. Streetworkers also provide information about the medical substitute therapies (the dolophine programmes).

Such help sometimes breeds resistance and controversy. Its opponents believe that such educational programmes do more to spread drug abuse than to limit it. However, access to clean and sterile needles and syringes is important since *it helps reduce the infections transmitted with blood, including HIV/AIDS. It also significantly facilitates contacts of the addicted with medical and therapeutic services, which (...) encourages decisions about treatment and rehabilitation* (Wodowski 2012).²

The most important tenets of streetworking based upon harm reduction are:

- ◆ help should be adjusted to an individual's current situation,
- ◆ abstinence is not always the most important and the most appropriate solution for the addict,
- ◆ even an addicted person is able to control and change his/her behaviour,
- ◆ some ways of taking drugs are safer than other ways,
- ◆ it is important to make drug users participate in designing strategies of helping them and others,
- ◆ in order to be effective, one should take into account the drug users' living conditions and the type of environment they engage with.

² See <http://narkomania.org.pl/czytelnia/index.php?nr=22>, as of March 31, 2012.

Streetworking in the group of street children

Street children are the children:

who, because of their parents' neglect of basic caring and educational functions, spend much time uncontrolled outside their homes, i.e. in the streets, backyards and other similar places. (...) They are, thus, raised in the street (Kołak 2000, pp. 7-9).

Their social situation makes them typical targets of streetworking aid programmes. Having no sustenance, many street children steal or beg, offer sex services, take drugs and are abused by adults. It is, therefore, imperative that they be included in the streetworkers' assistance to prevent them from demoralisation, abuse and HIV infection. Providing positive model of social roles, showing interest and patience and giving advice, streetworkers instruct the young in how to help themselves and where to apply for help. This group includes children who have a home but spend most of their time in the street, children who have a home but work in the street to maintain their families, homeless children or and children whose families are homeless. Among street children, there are also many runaways from homes or educational childcare facilities. They would not visit any aid institution voluntarily. They would not ask for help. They often do not know where to turn for help.

Their past experience of, for example, physical or sexual abuse makes street children distrustful towards adults. Streetworking makes it possible to contact them and to offer them immediate or long-term help. In towns, where child prostitution is rife, it is important to 'patrol' parks, gates, passageways and street corners. Besides, young people can be encountered at train stations, bus stops, in restaurants, fast-food bars, in deprived neighbourhoods, council estates, in gates and, plainly, in the street.

Streetworking targeting street children consists not only in prevention of exclusion, demoralisation, penalisation, drug abuse or sexually transmitted diseases, but also in showing opportunities of other ways of living. Streetworking gives these children a rare occasion to encounter a positive adult role model. Importantly,

the voluntary consent of a young person to establish contact and company results from the liberty offered to him/her. The more they trust the streetworker, the more they open up and reveal themselves to the streetworker (Międzynarodowy przewodnik... 2008, p. 25).

Jacques Pector adds that:

through their direct involvement in the socialization of youth, the streetworkers are both privileged witnesses of actual problems experienced by young people and mediators who accompany them in their existential and social development (qtd. in Międzynarodowy przewodnik... 2008, p. 24).

Streetworking in the homeless group

The environment of the homeless is highly diversified. The group includes people who really do not have a dwelling place, those who have homes but stay in the street to earn money and those for whom the street has become their living space to spend their time in. Due to their homelessness, they often lose everything: the job and/or family, a chance to develop properly, opportunities which even the most modest accommodation provides, a possibility to play certain social roles, etc.. Susceptible to diseases and addictions, they tend to arouse resentment and disgust. As such, they face rejection and social marginalisation. Streetworking in this environment has a distinctly peculiar character. Fostering social and occupational activation and helping to improve the dwelling conditions are a few of the streetworking tasks here. Streetworking in this group does not consist in combating homelessness but in offering support and help for the clients to live with dignity in a homeless environment if such is their choice. However, if a homeless person wants to change his/her status, the streetworker's role is to help and support him/her in finding resources facilitating his/her return to and new life in society.

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Streetworking programmes are necessary since institutions which should take care of the poorest and excluded happen to be incompetent and the state itself tends to be ineffective. Noticeably, various services and institutions focus more upon the symptoms than on the causes of exclusion and marginalisation. Social attitudes also make the development of streetworking necessary as the groups it targets are usually resented, rejected, ostracised and sometimes brutally attacked. A lot of discriminative and aggressive behaviours are caused by the lack of knowledge about such groups. Streetworking is rooted in the idea of reducing social costs and the belief that every person has the right to develop and to choose his/her own lifestyle. Far from accepting the destructive phenomena, streetworking, therefore, insists on learning about them and on respecting its clients' right to decide about themselves. Streetworking admits to them that not all people may, must, can or want to live the way the majority does. The message is: you are not alone in hardships and you may count on others to help you.

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