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Specialist counselling for the homeless people in Poland: Chances and limitations

The multidimensional dynamic of changes in the contemporary social reality constantly triggers new attempts to describe and systematise the knowledge of these changes as well as of their accompanying phenomena and their various effects. Social care services and the challenges for their organisation fall within this broad area. This article inscribes itself in these studies. It analyses the understandings of the role which specialist counselling plays in the support system for the homeless people and cites examples of specific solutions adopted in Poland, emphasising the urgency to introduce changes in this domain.

Keywords: homelessness, specialist counselling, support for the homeless people

Homelessness: Its contexts and multifaceted nature

The current social developments at the micro- and macro-scale and their complexity significantly affect human lives in postmodernity (Bauman, 2000). Their pace and scope often exceed the adaptive capacities of individuals, which results in vulnerability and helplessness, involvement in risky behaviours and, often, living-standard reduction (cf. Skalbania, 2009). The developments characteristic of post-traditional society described by Anthony Giddens (2002) and risk society conceptualised by Ulrich Beck (2002) make the individuals' situation in life increasingly difficult. In the widespread culture of individualism, a sense of alienation appears while everyday realities make decision-making self-sufficiency difficult indeed (cf. Jacyno, 2007). The struggle with the oppressive reality, the mounting problems and, even, the existential crises tends to exceed the capabilities of the individuals who are unable to adapt to the unpredictable and non-transparent world. Obviously, as Zdzisław Wołk (2011) notes, these challenges are not always really a novelty, but they are significantly complicated by the developments mentioned above, which are now increasingly dynamic and extend over a notably wider area of social problems. As a result, the individuals lose their sense of security and stability. They are unable to keep up with the changes and to cope with the specific demands of contemporary reality.

The social and civilisational crisis, the changes in living conditions and the destabilisation of the world order also significantly contribute to the exacerbation of social problems, including homelessness. The current scale of homelessness is alarming; it causes severe individual and socioeconomic consequences (Starega-Piasek, 2005). Furthermore, with the changing reality, the conditions and manifestations of homelessness keep changing as well. As a result, many democratic societies find homelessness an increasingly important social issue which urgently calls for effective solution (Olech, 2011).

For several years, entire Europe has been struggling with aggravating homelessness. European states are slowly becoming aware of its relevance and the social costs of negligence, particularly in prevention of and collaboration in addressing its effects. As Barbara Goryńska-Bittner (2011) observes, the EU societies find themselves in a special situation since the accession of the former socialist countries and the gradual opening of the labour markets to the citizens of the new member-states have produced new challenges for them. The freedom of movement enjoyed by the residents of the EU has a bearing on homelessness as the predicament affects especially the economic migrants from Central and Eastern Europe, including the Polish migrants. Consequently “new homelessness”¹ has appeared, having not only a global range and significance but also a distinctive, regional, European and local dimension (Dębski, 2011, p. 59).

Similarly to attempts at formulating a universally acceptable definition and typology of homelessness, attempts to identify all the main causes of and factors in homelessness are extremely difficult. This is evidenced by the variety of concepts explaining why people become homeless put forward in the international and Polish literature alike (Dębski, 2011). There are diverse classifications of the causes of homelessness, each of which defines them in a different way and attributes a different impact to particular determinants of homelessness. In general, however, the homelessness-causing factors tend to be outlined in a dichotomous framework.

In the Polish literature, homelessness is addressed either as a social phenomenon or as an individual situation (Porowski, 1998), and thus it is considered a result either of wider social problems or of the individual's problems (Sołtysiak, 1997). In turn, the classification proposed by Eugeniusz Moczuk (1999) frames the factors determining homelessness as an ensemble of heterogeneous causes related to the pathologies generated by the overall socio-economic and legal situation of a country, or even a continent, and personality-related or socio-psychological causes (cf. Szczepaniak-Wiecha, 2005). The multifacetedness of homelessness is equally comprehensively shown by Andrzej Przymieński (2001). The author insists that the individual (micro-social) determinants of becoming homeless are intertwined with the macro-social causes (resulting from the socio-economic situation, which

¹ M. Dębski, (2011, p.59) defines “new homelessness” as homelessness of the refugees, but also as homelessness among Poles who become homeless as a result of economic migration or upon return from an unsuccessful stay abroad.

significantly affects the increase in homelessness). He aptly points out that the division into the individual and the social factors is not as important as capturing the interaction between these dimensions. In this context, it is not possible to determine a one, single factor leading to homelessness since multiple areas of life of the affected individuals are involved in the process – starting from the material exigencies of life (lack of housing and income), to relations with other people (stigmatisation, social isolation), to personal needs (loneliness, loss of the meaning of life). Homelessness does not simply mean a lack of adequate accommodation but also entails a psychosocial dysfunction of the affected individuals.

Currently, such factors as addictions, crime, domestic violence, lasting dissolution of interpersonal relationships, family disintegration and mental disorders are counted among the causes of homelessness in Poland in A. Przyemeński's micro-social category. The macro-social category includes unemployment, poverty, inadequate health care system, social welfare failures, bad housing situation, demographic changes and social mobility (Dębski, 2011). Given this multiplicity of factors, the problem of homelessness is, without doubt, extremely complex, and providing support and assistance to the homeless is exceptionally difficult.

To tackle the complexity of homelessness, as well as of the socio-vocational reintegration of the affected social group, lies beyond the scope of this article. Therefore, it aims neither to indicate general reasons for the current state of affairs nor to arrive at generalisations which could prompt uninformed opinions on people disengaged from various spheres of socio-occupational life. Instead, the article aims to highlight the multifacetedness and current dynamic of homelessness and, above all, to focus on the kinds and pertinence of relevant help-provision, particularly of specialist counselling for the homeless and those at risk of homelessness.

Specialist counselling for the homeless people

The fact that subsistence difficulties and non-material problems commonly co-occur implies that social reintegration of the homeless people requires comprehensive measures. The effectiveness of support provision seems to be impaired if the aid package offered to the homeless does not include specialist counselling. As Marlena Jasnoch (n.d.) points out, the primary objective of specialist counselling is to improve the quality of life of support-seekers, facilitate their development and optimise various aspects of their social (individual, group, family or vocational) functioning. It involves specific interventions performed by professionals who seek to help in solving problem situations, thereby focusing, as Jasnoch insists, on support-seekers' inner experiences. Counselling professionals are expected to work for the clients' good, assist them in changing their attitudes and entrenched thinking and facilitate their problem-solving in order to minimise the impact of adverse

external conditions and strengthen their inner potential. Ideally, this should increase their chances of overcoming their current situation.

In psychological terms, the essence of the counselling process lies in fostering (in a person afflicted with or at risk of homelessness) a readiness to recover or acquire the ability to cope with his/her own problems, make the right decisions and implement them, as well as to avoid future behaviours conducive to life difficulties. From the counsellor perspective, counselling is an interpersonal process of support-provision in which a homeless person, or one at risk of homelessness, becomes an equal partner in the activities undertaken for their benefit. It is a process which, according to Alicja Kargulowa (2004, p. 56), can be defined as “facilitating self-change” since professional counselling interventions aim to develop motivation, enrich the information resources and overcome the stereotypes rife in counselees’ social awareness. Thereby, professional counselling fosters changes in thinking and in perceptions of the adverse life circumstances, which seems to be an even more valuable outcome since, as B. Goryńska-Bittner observes, “the tendency to blame solely the homeless individuals (or society) for their difficult situation is still widespread in the social perception” (2011, p. 148). In fact, homelessness, as already mentioned, is a much more complex phenomenon and requires solutions that allow for the unpredictability and subjectivity of human behaviours in the context of cultural traditions, particularly in view of the on-going transformations.

The legal frameworks for counselling

As a member of the European Union and the Council of Europe, Poland is obligated to develop a model of active social policy. Responsible for the citizens’ living standard and quality of life, the state and the local governments are supposed, among others, to implement active measures to combat poverty and social exclusion. The model is underpinned by civil and social rights recognised in the *European Social Charter* (revised) (1996) and the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* (O.J. EU C303, 14.12.2007). Both documents, together with Articles 151 and 153 of the *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union*, form the basis for active social policy-making, which includes social assistance, therein specialist counselling.²

Implementation of specialist counselling in Poland is founded mainly on Article 46 of the Social Assistance Act of 12 March 2004³ – the legislation regulating the system of social benefits. The Article stipulates that specialist counselling is provided to individuals and families who are in difficulty or require assistance in solving their life problems, regardless of their income. It also defines the three main areas of specialist counselling, i.e. – legal, psychological and family counselling – but

² Based on the report of the social assistance expert group (Stenka, 2011).

³ Dziennik Ustaw (OJL) 2004.64.593 with amendments.

does not rule out either providing specialist counselling in other areas (e.g. civil counselling) or organising specialist counselling for selected target groups, including the homeless people and those at risk of homelessness as well as their families (Kaczmarek et. al., n.d.)

According to the Social Assistance Act, specialist counselling types include:

Psychological counselling – is a form of psychological support offered to the individuals in a crisis situation, who experience difficulties in adaptation and emancipation (Czabała, Sęk, 2001, p. 617). The goal for the counsellor and the counsellee (the client) is to identify the problem and the factors perpetuating it as well as to search for ways to overcome the crisis and alleviate or remove the difficulties in solving it. Therefore, strengthening the client and promoting his/her development and problem-solving predispositions are the key factors in psychological counselling. Using this type of counselling is an emotionally involving activity, not only because of the problem itself but also because of the nature of the social relations in which the psychologist (counsellor) and the homeless person (client) are engaged. Psychological counselling requires that the client fully open up to a stranger as well as clearly formulate and verbalise his/her problems. It also demands sincerity of expression and an ability to address uncomfortable subjects.

In the initial meetings with the psychologist, a diagnosis is drafted. It should determine whether the homeless person's problems stem from his/her personality disorder or from his/her current life situation, as well as whether counselling is a suitable form of psychological help for the person in question or whether, perhaps, s/he should be referred to another professional (Jaroszewski, n.d.)

Psychological, legal, social and/or medical support is usually preceded by a **crisis intervention** which involves diverse interdisciplinary activities aimed to restore a tolerable equilibrium in the homeless person's life by providing immediate specialised assistance. As the very term suggests, crisis interventions are incidental and dynamic. They comprise quick-paced and intense actions. The goal of the crisis intervention is to restore the homeless person's mental balance and ability to cope with all pressing issues independently, thereby preventing the crisis reaction from petrifying into chronic psycho-social failure (Social Assistance Act of 12 March 2004 – art. 47.1). In duly justified cases, the crisis intervention may include providing shelter (up to 3 months) (art. 47.3 of the same Act).⁴

Family counselling – includes family therapy and support in solving a wide range of disorders in family functioning, such as problems related to child-rearing in natural and foster families and to the care for a disabled person.⁵ Mainly educational, family counselling has, therefore, a very wide span and relies on various helping interventions for supporting the proper functioning of the family, covering comprehensive legal, economic and educational assistance.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ All these issues are covered by the Social Assistance Act of 12 March 2004 (*Ibid.*).

Legal counselling – includes advice and information on the Polish law in force and its practical application. Its aim is to help the client navigate effectively when faced with legal problems. The helping measures it offers include, among others, explaining and discussing the relevant legal provisions, providing legal correspondence templates, drafting pleadings, drawing up debt management plans, advising on the necessary steps to settle the client's legal situation and instructing on how to use the assistance of solicitors, barristers, etc. The most common legal counselling interventions concern matters falling under family law (divorces, separations, parental rights, spousal maintenance, etc.), criminal law (criminal proceedings) and administrative law (landlord-tenant law). Counselling is carried out by a qualified lawyer or a law student under the mandatory supervision (Winiarska, n.d.)

Civil counselling – is somewhat broader in scope than legal counselling. It includes information and advice on relations with the public administration. It is provided by qualified individuals, though not necessarily by lawyers. Its aim is not only to solve the citizens' problems but also to improve their resourcefulness, a prerequisite to their active participation in social, political and vocational life. Both types of counselling (legal and civil) are similar as they share the focus on legal aspects and the way of service-provision.

Given the specific nature of counselling for the homeless people, it may be conceived in two ways: either as a system of operations launched by a particular organisational structure which deals with various problems experienced by individuals and families in certain psycho-social conditions, or as specific interventions made by the expert supporting the individual in a problem situation and the relationship that develops between the two. In the former perspective, it can be noticed that, even though in legal terms the task of organising and ensuring counselling for the homeless rests with the local government (municipality), in practice, the main burden of counselling provision has been shouldered by non-governmental organisations. The research into the third sector shows that non-governmental organisations and their agencies not only supplement "the assistance package" provided by the first sector but also become an alternative to what (and how) it offers. Their important asset is greater individualisation of interactions – and such interactions are what counselling relies on – as well as provision of free services, regardless of the help-seeker's social situation. The two factors are rarely to be found in municipal socialising and multifunctional institutions. Unfortunately, although the third-sector institutions prove much more efficient and useful, over the last two years a decline has been noted in the proportion of associations and foundations with social assistance and social services declared as their main activities. Undoubtedly, this decline results from a lack of funds and low performance satisfaction, since the sense of mission and considerable commitment to support alone are no longer a sufficient reward for the sector's employees. To perform effectively in the field of social assistance, Polish non-governmental organisations need adequate funding

and recognition as important partners in professional help-provision. This, however, is not always the case.

This regrettable situation is, partly at least, explained by the fact that specialist counselling, as well as other forms of assisting social reintegration of the excluded individuals, has been largely absent from most organisations of both sectors and its full-fledged development was fuelled only in 2003 by the influx of the EU funding. Admittedly, isolated initiatives of this kind had been undertaken earlier; however, they were for the most part abandoned as both funds and legal frameworks were lacking. Currently, organisations and institutions involved in the active and complex social reintegration of the individuals who are homeless or at risk of homelessness not only find support in adequate legislation but also go beyond the institutional forms of assistance. Their actions are increasingly being inspired by the programmes devised in the countries more experienced in reintegration of the homeless.

Importantly, the range of operations (nationwide or local), the institution type (e.g. municipal social welfare services, social integration centres, homeless shelters, emergency intervention institutions) and the amount of funds raised from various sources are the key factors differentiating the implementation of specialist counselling in both sectors.

Good practice in specialist counselling: A few examples

Below, a handful of counselling projects are described to illustrate how specialist counselling is actually being implemented as a form of the homeless assistance in Poland. As presenting all the practices is, obviously, impossible given the size of this article, a few selected specialist counselling schemes are briefly depicted by way of example. These initiatives (both local and nationwide) have been informed by a distinctive and complex approach to the homeless people and, as such, have invited public interest and gained public recognition.

***Twój Dom – Partnerstwo na rzecz osób bezdomnych i zagrożonych bezdomnością w Dzielnicy Praga Południe m. st. Warszawy (Your Home – Partnership for the Homeless Individuals and People at Risk of Homelessness in the Warsaw Borough of Praga Południe)*⁶**

Financed by the European Social Fund, the project is a model solution based on building local multi-sectoral cooperation. The main objective of the project is to test the effectiveness of selected services proposed in the Municipal Standard of

⁶ For detailed information on the projects, see their websites listed in the references.

Leaving Homelessness.⁷ The measures implemented under the project in Warsaw's Praga Południe Borough from 1 March 2012 to 31 August 2013 included new forms of organising and implementing social work, street outreach, housing and immediate services, local partnership, employment and education. They were initiated and implemented by the Borough's Social Welfare Centre, the Stowarzyszenie Centrum Informacji Społecznej (the Centre for Social Information Association), "Caritas" of the Warszawa-Praga Diocese and the Stowarzyszenie Penitencjarne "Patronat" (the Patronage Penitentiary Association).

The distinct objectives of the Partnership included increasing the availability of specialist counselling for the individuals affected by or at risk of homelessness and reducing the residents' rent arrears by providing legal advice (counselling). As stipulated in the project's objectives, three specialist counselling agencies were established. Each of them offered advice on legal, housing and family issues provided by professional teams. Help-provision included also support in the health-insurance issues, job-seeking training and facilitation of social benefits and allowances.

The project-related activities included, thus, homelessness prevention at the micro-scale (homelessness of individuals) as well as at the macro-scale (homelessness of particular groups of the Borough's residents). Specialist counselling was an essential, permanent component of the local programme, conceived as a collaboration of the local government and non-governmental entities.

Systematycznie do celu (Steadily Toward the Goal)⁸

Steadily Toward the Goal, a long-term project co-financed by the European Union, is another example of a local cooperation scheme under which the individuals and families at risk of homelessness are provided not only with comprehensive support but also with counselling services corresponding to their identified needs.

The project was carried out by the Municipal Social Welfare Centre in Gdańsk between June 2008 and the end of 2013. Similarly to the project described above, it was designed for the individuals and families who struggle with complex problems and require long-term, sustained and close cooperation with various professionals, institutions and organisations. Besides the access to specialist counselling services, the project's beneficiaries got an opportunity to participate in vocational, social and personal budgeting training (rational and economical household budget management), psycho-educational meetings, support groups and individual therapy.

⁷ A national support framework including the standards of homeless services developed jointly by key Polish NGOs and recently endorsed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (cf. Stenka, Olech, Browarczyk, 2014).

⁸ The project is implemented within the Human Capital Operational Programme, under its Priority VII "Promotion of Social Integration," Measure 7.1 "Development and Promotion of Active Inclusion," Sub-measure 7.1.1 "Development and Promotion of Active Integration by Social Welfare Centres."

The project aimed to increase the social and vocational activity of the clients of the Municipal Social Welfare Centre in Gdańsk. This purpose was being achieved by encouraging the support-requiring individuals to acquire psychosocial and coping skills, by strengthening family ties and enhancing personal competences for the proper performance of family and civil roles and, finally, by increasing the availability of free social and vocational counselling and facilitating a more effective use of these services.

Similarly to the Praga Borough project, the scheme involved various institutions, including the District Employment Office, Pogotowie Opiekuncze im. K. Borchardta (the Karol Borchardt Emergency Shelter for Minors) and the Gdańsk Circle of Stowarzzenie Pomocy Św. Brata Alberta (the St. Brother Albert Aid Society).⁹ The latter partner was responsible for devising individual activation plans and arranging educational activities, group meetings, legal counselling services and health training for the individuals coping with difficult and complex life situations. In most cases, they had come to need support services as a result of mounting adversities and, sometimes, because of a lack of resourcefulness and/or coping-related skills and knowledge.

Noteworthy is the fact that the specialised activities (including counselling) undertaken within the project focused not only on the adaptation but also on the emancipation of the project beneficiaries. The goals included stimulating or restoring the individuals' constructive engagement with society, releasing their energy and initiatives, facilitating their acquisition of psychosocial coping-related skills and enhancing their personal competencies for the proper performance of social roles. The varied help forms, including individual and group measures, offered the individuals in need of support an opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills facilitating their social reintegration.

Pogotowie Interwencji Społecznej w Warszawie (Social Emergency Intervention Centre in Warsaw) and Podkarpacki Ośrodek Rozwoju Społeczeństwa Obywatelskiego (Subcarpathia Centre for Civil Society Development)

Development of non-governmental specialist counselling facilities for people affected by or at risk of homelessness seems to be a viable policy for achieving broader, supra-local outcomes. The Social Emergency Intervention Centre in Warsaw operated since 1994 by the Stowarzyszenie Pomocy i Interwencji Społecznej (Association of Help and the Social Intervention)¹⁰ is an excellent case in point. As the Centre's objective is working with the clients toward their complete self-reliance,

⁹ The largest and oldest nationwide Polish NGO helping the poor and the homeless.

¹⁰ Formerly known as the Stowarzyszenie Pomocy Bezdomnym (Association for Support of the Homeless)

rather than providing immediate support, it engages in diverse multi-sectoral collaboration. Depending on particular individual needs and expectations, the Centre cooperates with probation officers, prosecutors, the police and other public agencies whose mandatory duties include help-provision in the agglomeration.

The Centre's operations are based on the collaboration of various organisations and individuals, geared toward solving the homelessness problem by providing, among others, counselling services. Importantly, the measures launched under the programme are underpinned not only by teamwork but also by having various professionals open up to each other.

Another non-governmental institution implementing projects which offer free legal and civil counselling is the Subcarpathia Centre for Civil Society Development. The Centre makes the support available to the individuals at risk of marginalisation and social exclusion across the entire region (Subcarpathia), not just in one city. The Centre's specialist counselling services target not only the homeless, but also the poor, the unemployed, pensioners, single mothers, individuals in families affected by alcohol abuse and/or domestic violence, residents of remote villages and other people coping with difficult situations. With its protective and preventive priorities, this valuable initiative supports individuals in most need and, subscribing to the third sector's mission, it seeks to promote the development of civil society.

Rzecznik osoby bezdomnej (Homeless Ombudsman)

While in the above-mentioned examples of practical initiatives for people affected by or at risk of homelessness specialist counselling is just one of various forms of help-provision, it lies at the core of the *Homeless Ombudsman* project. The project was implemented by the Gdańsk Circle of the St. Brother Albert Aid Society in 2008-2012 and authorised by the Commissioner for Civil Rights (the Polish Ombudsman).

The homeless ombudsmen employed under the project represented not only the individual interests of people affected by or at risk of homelessness, but also the interests of the entire social group (in some cases also their communities). The specialist support aimed to provide the project's target group with knowledge about their rights and information on procedures to follow in dealing with various institutions. To ensure quality service, the ombudsmen's work was supervised by coaches trained in social work with the homeless. The consultation meetings with the ombudsmen were open not only to the individuals at risk of homelessness, but mainly to the residents of the homeless shelters run by the organisation.

The homeless ombudsmen's tasks included provision of direct psychological support, information and counselling for the individuals in need of help. In practice, the ombudsmen:

- ◆ defended the rights, represented the interests and spoke on behalf of the homeless individuals who needed such assistance;
- ◆ monitored the provisions of the legislation, particularly the local legislation;
- ◆ encouraged the individuals they represented and other participants in the support process to engage in public debates;
- ◆ prompted and facilitated the coalition- and partnership building for improved cooperation of social policy shareholders in combating homelessness;
- ◆ collaborated with social welfare organisations and institutions and other actors in the social policy sector;
- ◆ cooperated with the media to publicise the problem of homelessness and the role of ombudsmen in the homeless support system.

Specialist counselling provided by the homeless ombudsmen targeted only selected clients, i.e. people affected by or at risk of homelessness. The possibility to consult an ombudsman in the place of residence (the continuous support institutions) increased their ability to obtain psychological, legal and vocational counselling. Facilitating their access to free individual help-provision contributed to improving their chances for success in leaving homelessness and full social reintegration. Furthermore, under the scheme, the partners could exchange innovative ideas and experiences while the ombudsmen could upgrade their qualifications. Also, consultation facilities were established and comprehensive information was made available and disseminated.

The project was implemented in the Lublin, Małopolska, Mazovia, Pomerania, Lower Silesia and Subcarpathia Provinces. The professionally trained homeless ombudsmen were available in 20 towns in which the St. Brother Albert Aid Society has its Circles. Currently, efforts are being made to launch the fourth nationwide edition of the project.

Counselling and help-provision strategies: A new dimension

Discussing the importance of counselling in solving the problem of homelessness, one could attend to its new dimension inferable from the support projects for the homeless outlined in the foregoing. Firstly, counselling services do not have to be located in a separate institution (e.g. a consultation centre) to be available to advice-seekers. When combined with other helping services implemented under local initiatives, such as the “projects” reported above, these services are usually a highly welcome form of support next to the other offered forms of assistance. Secondly, specialist counselling for the individuals affected by or at risk of “new homelessness” will likely have to expand its offer by including measures distinct so far to intercultural counselling and will need counsellors trained to work with immigrants

from various cultural backgrounds. Thirdly, the status of counselling itself as a process of social life is changing. Non-governmental initiatives, including various support programmes for the homeless, foster new forms of counselling and increase its visibility in the public sphere, thereby enhancing the public interest in this form of aid. Noticeably, ever more individuals and, also, entire groups coping with difficult situations ask for counselling support – e.g. families, local communities, residents of nursing homes and even welfare institutions. Consequently, significant changes in help-provision strategies are observable, as exemplified by the above projects, which can serve as benchmarks and models for other agencies providing support for the individuals at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

A general conclusion offers itself that these initiatives involve measures which amplify the social function of counselling and broaden its scope. Counselling is relevant to the clients in at least two ways. Firstly, counselling creates opportunities of preparing the individual for self-sufficient and safer decision making, which entails achieving a better balance in everyday life. Secondly, counselling facilitates the elimination of barriers caused by social exclusion and, sometimes, even promotes equal social and vocational opportunity for the individuals at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

The quality of counselling, in turn, may be examined at the level of organising, creating and re-inventing counselling practices as well as at the level of individual use of the service (the client faces a problem, experiences it, solves it with the counsellor's support and evaluates the quality of the support). The adoption of a particular perspective depends on what specific view on the phenomenon is embraced. In its individual dimension, the quality of counselling is associated mainly with constructing interactions and creating the space for support in individual problem-solving. This approach allows grasping the "specificity" of the meeting (of the support-seeker and the counsellor) itself and evaluating the relevance of this event to the entire biography of the homeless advice-seeker.

For many years, counselling has usually been associated with directive forms of support. Currently, an approach emphasising liberty, freedom of choice, partner dialogue and the client's self-dependence is becoming more pervasive in various kinds of counselling (Czerkawska, 2004; Kargulowa, 2004; Minta, 2012; Siarkiewicz, 2010; Wojtasik, 2011 and others). In such a framework, the counsellor-client relationship takes on a different shape. The counsellor's support means sharing knowledge, experience, competences, feelings and commitment to the process of assisting an individual through a difficult situation. Rather than in providing specific instructions, the quality of counselling lies in creating an atmosphere of trust and security, encouraging the client to develop and find his/her own solution. However, in counselling for the homeless people, the quality should not reside solely in supportive and motivational measures as it still often requires a directive approach, especially in the case of a crisis intervention. This kind of help-provision for the

homeless entails now providing the individual with an opportunity to use also other services warranted by the state's preventive, educational and therapeutic functions.

Undoubtedly, the purpose of counselling services within various projects was to ensure assistance to people at risk of and experiencing homelessness and, thereby, to counteract the negative effects of legal, family and/or psychological problems they went through as well as to increase their knowledge and motivation to change their situation. However, such an approach to supporting those affected by or at risk of homelessness is only one of many possible options. Solving social problems as pressing as homelessness requires a number of initiatives that go beyond the formula of counselling and are launched not only locally but also nationally and transnationally. Moreover, implementation of any such measures, by both the public and the non-governmental entities, requires continuous evaluation and effectiveness monitoring.

As rightly pointed by Aneta Wiącek (2011), the general status of those who have "left homelessness" and become self-dependent, as well as the actual effect help-provision has had on their emancipation, is not entirely clear. It is not fully obvious either which actions – including counselling – have effectively led to that or how help-provision has actually affected the individual. Reliable evaluation is acutely lacking, especially for the effectiveness of the use of sizeable funding, including the public resources, for combating homelessness.

All doubts related to support activities targeted at the homeless and those at risk of homelessness seem to open up new fields for counselling researchers and other social scientists to explore. As many questions are still left unanswered, it seems only appropriate to agree with Jacek Hołówka, who insists that every form of help must be concrete, useful and real. Its value depends only on in how far those in need can benefit from it. Intentions alone do not make it a good thing, nor does the benefactor's commitment or the fact that it is actually called help. For helping by and in itself is not important – all important is how this help is provided (1994, pp. 390-391). The support initiatives described above seem to indicate that their initiators indeed appreciated the importance of these words.

Changes in the organisation of counselling: Opportunities and limitations

The analysis of the experiences of the projects described above suggests that specialist counselling for the homeless may generally develop and improve in three directions. One of them is related to its organisation and expansion of the already existing measures, mainly by ensuring an adequate access to specialist services, diversifying the facilitation forms they offer and improving the collaboration of wider communities (networks of institutions, social collectives, organisations) involved in counselling. Another direction pertains to the development of methods and the

improvement of the quality of “services” by coordinating the collaboration on behalf of and for the homeless, because not all people, groups and communities actually need extensive help. Excessive support-provision may deplete motivation for self-change and lower aspirations to function self-sufficiently, reflectively and independently, resulting possibly in the individual’s dependence on the social support system. Therefore, the challenge lies in improving the methods of counselling and support that buttress the motivational mechanisms and the techniques that induce the individuals to take action to improve their life situation and accept this particular form of support. “The project practice” shows that it is necessary to vary the degree of the support-providers’ involvement (in terms of time and emotions) and to gear the counselling process to fostering the support-seekers’ activity and emancipation.

Without doubt, the support process is a reality created by the two parties to the ever-changing relationship – by the support-givers and the support-recipients (Czerkawska, 2004; Józefczyk, n.d.; Kargulowa, 2004; Siarkiewicz, 2010; Skalbania, 2009, and others). Therefore, the third direction for the development of counselling, i.e. counsellor education and training, seems to be so important. In Poland, counsellors are graduates of psychology, pedagogy and sociology degrees. Upgrading their skills, as a rule, involves further studies, vocational development post-graduate programs and specialised training courses. Counsellors may also improve their skills through self-study, supervision and/or experience sharing. However, the “support experts” rarely interrogate their acquired knowledge or critically examine their own practice. Yet, professional self-reflection may contribute to improving the practice of counselling, especially for the homeless, since every encounter with another human being is, to a lesser or greater extent, unpredictable. Therefore, the actual counselling process does not always reflect the methodical proceeding described in the literature. Undoubtedly, the awareness of the principles governing practical activities and the psychosocial mechanisms behind homelessness can help the “support experts” approximate the behaviour required by the actual exigencies, while systematic knowledge can give them a sense of efficacy, especially in new challenges, by underpinning their understanding and suggesting possible solutions. (Self-)Preparation of counsellors for professional practice importantly involves constant reflective monitoring of their own activities, performing self-evaluation and seeking answers to the questions about the meaning and foundation of a helping relationship (cf. e.g., Minta, 2012; Wojtasik, 2012, and other publications of the KOWEZiU’s Euroguidance series).

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