CONCEPT OF HOME FROM THE SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: In sociological literature, the term "home" is usually replaced by the synonym "community" (Keller, 2013). The concept of home may be challenging also for social workers, for whom this concept remains mysterious. Their profession is primarily focused on client´s problem solving (Musil, 2004). If they see client´s home as a problem, they can reduce it to "housing". This article aims to outline the meaning of the term home more precisely referring not only to the texts of various authors, but also relying on partial empirical outputs of her dissertation thesis. In terms of its content, the article builds on the conference paper "Secret of home in perspective of sociology and social work" presented by the author at the PhD e-conference (QUAERE 2017) in June 2017.

Keywords: home, sociology, homeless, secret, conference

1 Introduction

In sociology, the term home is usually replaced by the synonym "community" (Keller 2013). Some authors (Edgar, Meetr 2005) assess the importance of home through the operational definition of the phenomenon of homelessness and exclusion from housing. In this context, they attach great importance to the depth of the individual's social relationships creating his or her home. Nevertheless, home remains to a certain extent a mysterious concept shrouded in secrecy also for members of one of the applied branches of sociology - social work.

In the first part of the article, the author looks at the sociological concepts of home. She presents several aspects of the life of homeless people who, in the eyes of sociologists (Keller 2013, 2014), belong to the individuals who may be variously excluded from society.

The second part of the article defines home from the social work perspective. The author using help of the further cited authors (Kostrzyńska 2012, Gojová 2016, etc.) considers possibilities of effective social work intervention in the field of housing. Together with one of the authors (Kostrzyńska, 2012), she poses the following question. *"How can a social worker effectively intervene in the life of a homeless person?"* In this context, the author discusses how homeless clients can look at their social status and evaluate their contact with social workers. [1]

The final part of this text focuses on the concept of social entrepreneurship as a possible tool for intervening of the social worker in the life of homeless people.

2 What is home?

The sociology-oriented literature (Sýkorová 2014, Mackie 2011) connects the concept of home with the solution of housing issues of different social group members (e.g. people with disabilities, elderly, etc.) who may be at different levels exposed to the risk of social exclusion and one of its most serious consequences - homelessness. Along the loss of shelter (rooflessness), Edgar and Meert (2005) describe conditions in which people cannot build stable social relationships that create their home. They have unsatisfactory and potentially dangerous housing where they face a wide range of risks (social, health, etc.). The authors also point out that a person living in this situation is in persistent existential uncertainty that may result from the lack of space for the development of interpersonal relationships. These relationships are strengthened in interaction with other people both inside and outside of their home (e.g. with family, friends, neighbours, colleagues, etc.).

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[1] In the article, the author refers to the partial outputs from the research she conducts as part of her dissertation thesis on "Housing of persons with physical disabilities living in the territory of the statutory city of Ostrava".

The above suggests that home can mean more than only a place where a person physically lives on his/her own or with his/her family. It significantly depends on the level of interpersonal relationships and on emotional bonds between the household members, which can enhance the feeling of home for each individual. Hogenová (2008) believes that creation of home environment is a continuous activity being a meaning of life for many people. Kostrzyńska (2012) holds a similar perspective believing that potential loss of housing (and thus of home) may significantly disrupt the individual's identity. From the psychological point of view, a homeless person can further feel lonely and besides rooflessness, he/she can face a so-called "emotional" homelessness. It means that he/she usually does not identify with people in similar situation, and his/her adaptability to the loss of home depends on the level of his/her contacts with people not having housing problems, i.e. not being socially excluded citizens (e.g. with social workers) (Kostrzyńska 2012).

3 Homeless people as the social work clients

The important feature of the social work profession is that they are predominantly problem solving oriented (Musil 2004). If a social worker views client's home as a problem, he/she can reduce this part of the client's life to housing only (Rozhoň 2015). This is in contradiction with the deeper concept of home outlined above. The risks that accompany the person living on the street may, on one hand, be related to his reduced ability to cope with the demands of everyday life. He/she may have problems with hygiene and dietary habits, availability of health care, lack of finance needed to find a suitable housing, increasing criminal activity, etc. (Kostrzyńska 2012). His/her emotional ties with people in his or her near social environment can be (ir)recoverably disturbed, which corresponds to the aforementioned emotional homelessness.

In this regard, Keller (2013: 86-87) pays attention to the process of progressive loss of home which he believes takes several stages. In the first stage, the *home is at risk*, with a rising work issues. Both young and older people still have self-confidence, hope and determination to overcome the problem. The middle-age generation are reluctant to accept help from social workers. On the contrary, younger people tend to be more accommodating to accept help.

Unless anything changes, the following stage is called "*fight for home"*. It is usually accompanied by deepening difficulties to find a job. There is deterioration in health, disruption of family bond. This all together or separately leads to the need for institutional help. It can be the key stage in which it is decided whether home will be found again, or people at risk will definitely lose it. People who enter this stage can respond in two ways. Some have not given up on their fight yet; they look hard for a job and actively try to deal with all problems. This group includes the above cited CP1. The others have no longer any motivation to work.

The subsequent loss of home is a stage in which all the hope for home recovery ends. The disadvantages cumulate: people find themselves outside the market, their families are broken, they lost their housing and their health problems grow. They neither have income from work as in the first stage nor more or less regular income from social benefits as in the second stage. Without any permanent income, they cannot keep their housing. They combine various one-time sources (charity, undeclared work, begging, petty thefts). Clients have again two ways of response. They can retain the rest of their will for social and professional integration; get back from the edge of society (they dream of a new life). Or they can reconcile the misery of poverty and resign to the last attempt to re-establish their home (Keller, 2013: 86-87).

I suppose that especially for the first way the response to the loss of home and associated securities, people can more or less

succeed in the world of homelessness that initially seemed strange to them. According to Kostrzyńska (2012), they can create organized communities over time the members of which do not consider themselves to be socially excluded. On the contrary, the results of several scientific researches show that members of majority are metaphorically transferred to the role of the excluded, as they cannot fully understand the world (i.e. the experience) of homeless people (Kostrzyńska, 2012). One of those who are to some extent outside the world of the clients living on streets is usually a social worker.

According to Kostrzyńska (2012), social workers face the following question. "How does this context shape their role in the contact with a homeless client?" *As indicated above, social worker can oscillate between two worlds in his/her work with this target group* - in the world of homeless clients and in the world of people with their own housing secured.[2] The aforementioned author recommends that it is appropriate for a social worker to approach work with these people on several levels. Whereas at the individual level, he/she should be in direct contact with the life situation of current and potential clients, at the structural level, he/she should affect not only individuals but also society as a whole. Social workers should also support the development of job opportunities to increase the chances of homeless people not only to get a job but also to obtain an adequate housing that will become their home. However, home still remains a mystery for social worker (Rozhoň 2015), which is likely to be revealed at the interactive level (Kostrzyńska 2012).

The interactive social worker enters the client's natural environment. During the collaboration, both sides mutually share their experience. An important factor influencing their contact is the "right moment" of the social worker's arrival into the client's life. Kostrzyńska (2012) emphasizes that this moment should be determined by the client (with regard to his/her needs), not only based on the social worker's decision. From the social worker´s point of view, the client becomes a true expert in solving his/her life situation. This fact is approached by foreign researchers on housing (Mackie 2011, Dean 2003, Kostrzyńska 2012), some of which deal with the approach of young people with disabilities to their housing problem solving.

The above mentioned researchers seek answers to the following questions: "*When do young people with disabilities make decisions regarding their housing? What do young people think about their home? How do they look at their housing situation? How do they feel in their home? What possible changes should be made to their homes? What support do they receive from other entities (in the housing market, in the labour market, from social service providers, social workers)?* [3]"(Dean 2003).

In the light of the above, it seems that homeless people can be a highly organized community the members of which do not consider themselves to be socially excluded. This means, among other things, that the physical absence of one's own housing may not represent a major problem for the "potential client" to be solved in cooperation with the social worker (Kostrzyńska 2014).

Partial outcomes of my research show that both social worker and other people in the neighbourhood can support homeless person in fulfilling other basic living needs (i.e. eating, clean clothing, providing a place to sleep, etc.).

 CP said:"*...the people who surrounded me when I was on the street... they noticed that something was wrong with me. ...Somehow they started helping me. Whether it was food or advice or clean clothes...*"(CP1)[4]

The support, comfort, and safety provided by the surroundings can ultimately lead homeless person to thinking about a possible change in their way of life.

"*... well, and so they actually helped me find... the flophouse where I had peace ... And I actually started thinking about... if I want to live like that any longer. I had a lot of help from social workers at that hostel. And they saw that I wanted to change something. So we were looking for some ways... (CP1)*

3 Homeless people as social entrepreneurs

With regard to the above, social workers face one more question. *"Which ways of intervention can I use to understand the meanings that their clients (such as homeless people) attribute to their home?* The traditional approach of the social work profession mainly focuses on working with an individual, which can limit the workers´ view of the client's situation in a broader social context (e.g. with regard to changes taking place in the labour market) (Musil, 2004).

Gojová (2016) recommends paying attention to new practices introduced into the social work practice. These practices are designed to respond to the ongoing changes in today's late-modern society, such as the declining functioning of welfare state (Keller 2009) or the growing influence of the economy, which also covertly influence the nature of social exclusion and homelessness (and other social problems). Gojová (2016) believes that such a social atmosphere favours the application of "social entrepreneurship". It can be defined as an economic activity that gives socially disadvantaged members of society (i.e. elderly, people with disabilities, etc.) an opportunity to find their place in the labour market (Gojová 2016). In this context, I find it worthwhile to mention that social entrepreneurship may not only involve purely economic activities. Kostrzyńska (2014) states that some homeless people also consider themselves to be "social entrepreneurs". From their point of view, they can manage their own lives and determine conditions for their eventual return among the members of majority. It leads me to a belief that social entrepreneurship can also be understood as expression of one's ability to cope with the above-mentioned risks that accompany the threat or loss of home. As a "social entrepreneur", a homeless person can also make the decision whether or not to cooperate with the social worker. The interviews carried out by the author of this article imply that some people living on the street may initially feel distrust towards social workers who contact them. This may inter alia relate to the age difference of the two sides.

CP also said: "I did not get it at first... But I looked at it from my perspective and the social worker had a completely different way." (CP1)

However, if the client-social worker cooperation is successful, it can make a significant change for the life of a homeless person. Not only can he/she acquire new skills that are important for acquiring and maintaining a permanent housing, but he/she can also try to restore relationships with his/her loved ones which have previously been disrupted. He/she can further (e.g. as a volunteer) support other homeless people living in a similar situation. The above-mentioned interviews also indicate that to a certain extent, positive relationship between the client and the social worker can help replace the missing family. The social worker´s approach directly influences the creation of the client's home. However, I believe that it is fundamental to properly carry the professional power and control associated with the human effort of the social worker to support and help the homeless client. The social worker then faces one of the dilemmas. It is to maintain clearly defined boundaries in the social worker-client relationship, which corresponds to the required professional approach of the worker. The phenomenon of power and control applied in the social work field is addressed more closely by Kraus 2014, Janebová 2015, Musil 2014 and others. According to Keller (2013), social worker should perceive his/her work as a tool to help the client to maintain his/her autonomy.

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[2] In this context, Kostrzyńska (2012) distinguishes two worlds - "world of theirs" (i.e. world of homeless people) and "world of strangers" (i.e. people with secured housing).
[3] The above mentioned questions were translated by the author of the article.
[4] CP1 = Communication Partner. A participant in the research conducted within the author´s dissertation thesis.

4 Conclusions

The author aimed to bring the reader close to the possible meaning of the concept of "home", which presents a certain mystery to social workers. Based on information not only from the cited authors, but also from the interviews conducted within her dissertation thesis, she came to the following conclusion. Home as such cannot be defined universally. It represents a background which every person experiences subjectively. It is not rare that the meaning of home is covered to the researcher under the term of housing, which in fact represents a physically occupied place. For a social worker´s deeper understanding of the meaning of his/her client's home, he/she should approach it in terms of all three levels defined by Kostrzyńska (2012).

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