

Anna Jarkiewicz

Department of Social Pedagogy
University of Lodz

anna.jarkiewicz@poczta.onet.pl

THE PROCESS OF CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL WORK WITH MENTALLY ILL CLIENTS

Before I started my work at the University of Lodz I have spent six months as an apprentice in the City Social Welfare Centre (MOPS). This experience allowed me to see what the everyday work of social worker is all about. It is hard for me to definitely state what my actual duties were, as the Centre did not give me any concrete tasks to perform. So the way of spending time at work was basically all up to me. I decided to take this time to get to know, as much as it was possible, the scope of work which after my apprenticeship I would probably have to carry out. Obviously my life took a different turn. Eventually I was never employed by the City Social Welfare Centre, because when I was about to sign a contract with them I got an opportunity to become an assistant at the Department of Social Pedagogy but these six months spent in the Centre inspired me to do research and use it for my PhD studies.

Many of the researchers working in the field of social work do not have a chance to observe the institution's routine from the inside and to use this experience to find an interesting issue for further studies. I had this chance. And such a possibility has an undoubtedly high value from the qualitative studies' perspective. It might be compared to a journey to far away land with an aim to discover a reality governing it. In such a journey to assume anything beforehand is quite difficult, sometimes even impossible. When I look back, I can honestly say that time spent in the City Social Welfare Centre was my very own trip to terra incognita. Of course I exaggerate by saying that the City Social Welfare Centre was completely unknown field for me. However during my apprenticeship I was surprised by a lot of aspects and this led me to build a thesis for further studies. I am absolutely sure that my interest would be directed towards other subjects, if I did not run into a practical aspect of social work, if I was not working "on the ground". And thanks to my experience this practical issue became the subject of my studies.

I was always interested in problems having relation to mental diseases, because it is quite often that the people who come for help to the welfare centres are diagnosed with psychiatric problems. By such diagnose I mean both the medical diagnose given by a psychiatrist, as well as a so called "diagnose" given by a social worker. Categorisation is one of the fundamental operations used for interpreting social reality. Such categorisation is not only an ordinal tool, quite often of negative nature or a creation of social workers used for the professional purpose, and as such might not be understood outside of this group or might have a stigmatising effect. For the social worker categorisation becomes an incentive to schedule specific actions.

It is of no importance, from the standpoint of my studies, whether or not the client went through psychiatric treatment. The most important is the way in which the social worker perceives and talks about the person in question. And a definition of any given person becomes a determinant establishing the way of handling that person, referring to her and taking specific actions. I hope that I will be able to capture the specifics of work with such a group of clients, thus causing a deeper after-thought over this concrete field of action.

And maybe being able to capture the process of "becoming a fool" will open the door to understanding a wider context of defining a person as "insane". What exactly our society means by "mentally sick"? This brings us to socio-cultural conditionings and occurrence of the term "mental disease" in a social awareness, because social worker is also a member of certain society and his/her knowledge on the world and different events is not built in isolation from this society.

Only a prolonged participation in “their” world enables us to gather data and information which will allow us to draw exploratory conclusions of certain kind.

In my study I use a method known as the grounded theory research. On the basis of participant observation and interviews with social workers I would like to familiarise myself, as a researcher, with their reality. Another important issue is also a choice of grounds for studies. Actually I'm collecting data in municipal welfare centre.