DOCUMENTARY FILM AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL WORK – THE EXPERIENCE OF SOCIAL WORKER

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In the article, I present, on the basis of my own experiences, how a documentary film could be used in the field of social work. A documentary film as a medium gets wider audience. It reaches, not only the client of the social welfare and its milieu, but also society which he lives in. It is not easy to introduce changes in the area of mental health and in the life of persons with psychosocial disability if no social transformation on thinking about this problem is observed. If we, persons without disability, will continue to believe that the ill persons are dangerous and aggressive, even the most excellent modification in this field will not lead to important changes in their lives. They will continue to be excluded and not welcome in the company of “normals”. Concerning this, the activities of the social workers should be focused on the changes of social awareness, imaginations and stereotypes. Based on my own experiences in the article it is shown how social workers could change social awareness using a documentary film.

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to fight of stereotyping of persons with psychosocial disability. The film under the title “Survival” showed the life-story of (not)ordinary man who is suffering from schizophrenia. The presentation of his in everyday life was an intentional technique to prove a society that people with schizophrenia do not differ much from us – so called “normal people”. “Survival” was shown in many film festivals, for example in London (well-known documentary film festival, which presented the best documentary films), Serbia, Estonia and Poland. Currently is used in didactic work with students of social pedagogy.

We participated in the daily life of our film’s hero during a period of two years. Throughout this time, we got acquainted with his daily life by observing how he live, what he feel, how he understand and interpret the situations.

I, as a social pedagogue, have used the film material because I believed that film gave me opportunity to reach a wider audience. The central focus of mine enquiry are the viewers. The purpose of Survival is to stimulate a reflection about the psychosocial disability. People who have never met someone suffering from schizophrenia usually afraid of them. So the film is a real chance to show others that they can be wrong, and they don’t have reason to afraid of.

In my opinion, using by social workers documentary film as a social work method could be very effective to fight against social exclusion and marginalization. Of course I am aware that the method is not available for all social workers, for example social workers who works at social welfare centre probably won’t have a time for that, but I see possibility to use it for instance in non governmental organization.

“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing”.  

1 Def. International Federation Social Workers
It appears wherever a man interacts with his environment. This especially regards people who have found themselves in a predicament and their participation in social / collective life is at risk of exclusion. The National Association of Social Workers states that “the field of social work comprises, beyond the economically impaired persons, diverse therapeutic, rehabilitating, and educational activity, addressed to individuals and families who have difficulty in social functioning because of their social situation, their physical, psychological, or interpersonal deficiencies, or any kind of addiction (Szmagalski, 1994). The definition of “social work” indicates a range of competencies and skills that a social worker should have and it emphasizes the social role of the profession.

In Poland within the public awareness, the profession of social worker still has no clear connotation if we compare with others professions as psychologist, psychotherapists, medical doctors or lawyers. This situation could have a negative impact on the effectiveness of actions. An average citizen usually has problems in defining the responsibilities of social workers and the kind of work they perform. Social work is associated with an activity that is focusing on people in need, the poor, and people with different types of problems. Embracing what this activity means is problematic for people who so far have not used the help of welfare centers. At the same time, the clients associate social work with a particular person (called by them “Ms. Social,” “Loony” or simply a “Social”) working at a social welfare center (commonly referred to as “the Care”), most often a woman who decides whether a person applying for social benefits is entitled to receive them or not. An effect of the adoption of the perception of social work outlined above is that people turn to a social welfare facilities when their economic situation deteriorates. At present, in Poland, people seek the assistance of a social worker in the event of problems connected, for instance, with the relationship with the Other, or problems with the functioning in a certain environment only occasionally. A social worker is not treated in the society as a person whose job is to prevent social exclusion of a particular individual. The original missionary nature of the profession was transformed / partially supplanted, and turned into “
a sacred duty” of the state towards certain groups of people who “de-
serve.”
Changes in the perception of social work and the representatives of the
profession are happening slowly, but it should be stressed that a lot has
already been done in this area and numerous measures are still taken
(I mean here the emerging trade unions, associations, new and amended
Acts on Social Assistance and the profession of social worker, appointing
a profession of a family assistant, etc.).

FUNCTIONS OF SOCIAL WORK

Social work and representatives of social professions can perform dif-
ferent functions towards the society. Among numerous categorizations,
“the proposal of Robert Castel proves useful for the analysis of the field
of social work from the socio-pedagogical perspective.” (Marynowicz-
Hetka, 2006) He distinguished the following functions: protective,
contesting and mediation.
As part of the protective function, activities are taken to stabilize and
maintain the balance of social life. A social worker performs then, inter
alia, the role of a distributor of goods, which is directly related to grant-
ing benefits, subsidized lunches, holidays for children of the families
under the care of the center, etc. The specificity of the work done within
the framework of this function is close to the expectations of the clients
mentioned above.
The second function – the contesting one – requires from a social worker
the adoption of the role of a spokesman for those who have been ex-
cluded from social life. The worker becomes then a representative of
the interests of certain categories of people. Being a good spokesperson
demands a thorough knowledge of the world of the people, on whose
behalf he/she wants to speak. The social worker should therefore try to

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2 For a period of six months I was as an intern in the Social Welfare Center. The opinion,
which was formulated by me above is based on observation of client behavior and their
views. It should be noted that this applies only to some clients.
comprehend it not through the prism of the norms and values recognized by him/her, but through finding the meaning his/her client assigns to specific values and identifying what is important, normal, etc. to such client. Activities taken under this function are radical. The worker is the protector of the rights of the people who have been excluded.

As part of the function of mediation, the representatives of social professions try to work out, together with the client, an agreement and common understanding. The attention is then focused on the development of a contract project. The worker assumes the role of a mediator. The aim of the action is to mediate between the socially excluded persons and the people who exclude them, i.e. restoring the communication that has been destroyed or broken. In this case, the worker does not join either side, but tries to understand the reasons of both parties. The result of this work is therefore working out an agreement.

Each of the above functions directs the activities performed by a social worker in a different way.

SOCIAL WORKER AS A SPOKESPERSON

In the following part of the text, I will focus on the function called after Castel “the contesting function.” The purpose of this function is to get to know the world in which the excluded person lives and become his/her spokesperson in a confrontation with people who, for example, discriminate his/her opinions because of the origin or low social status, etc. The social worker performing this function expresses his/her objection to the existing order and tries to change the interdependencies prevailing among various groups in the society. At the same time, the spokesperson will always stand on the side of those who are treated unfairly by the society, whose rights are violated, who are excluded.

The problems of excluded people are usually spoken of by others, such as politicians, journalists. Taking up this subject is dependent on, for example, the occurrence of a specific event. For instance, the homeless and their problems are usually discussed in the winter, which is the period particularly problematic for this group. The news report the first cases
of freezing to death, the next reports refer to the number of beds in shelters for the homeless and the possibilities of other forms of assistance that they may use, etc. In turn, the issue of (potentially) disturbed or persons with psychosocial disability has a chance to appear in the media in the context of a tragedy, such as when a murder has been committed or a situation has occurred in which human life has been threatened. Then, press or (and) television provides the information that the perpetrator is sent for psychiatric observation. It is hard to tell what the fate of this man will be, whether a psychiatric diagnosis is going to be completed or not, because the media are not interested in this part of the case anymore, but the implication of the first piece of information, regarding the act of sending such a person for observation to a mental hospital becomes the basis of instilling in people the idea of the nature of psychosocial disability and the risk stemming from the fact of having a persons with psychosocial disability in close proximity, such as the neighborhood. In the course of studying issues related to the phenomenon of psychosocial disability I have not come across a study that would address the role of the media in the way of perceiving the persons with psychosocial disability by the society, but – intuitively – one can argue that the media create and reinforce a negative image of people suffering from psychosocial disability through placing this subject in the context of the above-mentioned situations. However, the topic of psychosocial disability is not recognize by many researchers in Poland are not many researchers linked with social work filed. A unique monograph is the position of Kaszyński H. (2013) under the title “Social work with people suffering from psychosocial disability”, which presents a sociological perspective of this phenomenon. The subject of psychosocial disability in Poland is not neglected by other sciences. Psychiatrists, psychologists, whose presents a medical approach are the dominant group that speak on issues related to this phenomenon. Among the few existing studies conducted by social workers I found a research of Makary Studzińskie and Janowskiej (2000). On the basis of

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3 This group of people and the problems related to the phenomenon of psychiatric disorders are my main research area.
the studies conducted in Lublin in 1996, it can be gathered that people who have developed a psychosocial disability are seen as perpetrators of crimes. The respondents argued that persons with psychosocial disability are aggressive and should be subjected to hormonal or surgical treatment, even without their consent to such treatment. Other surveys and studies show that there is a specific hierarchy of the level of tolerance in relation to certain categories of people. In this ranking, the individuals suffering from psychosocial disability are located among the least favorably perceived persons in the public consciousness (Lyons, Hayes, 1993, cited in Brodniak, 2000). For example, environmental forms of assistance for this category of persons are less approvingly perceived by the local community than the help provided to the elderly and people with physical disabilities (Wilmoth, Burnett, 1983, cited in Brodniak, 2000). Another study of the opinions and attitudes towards the persons with psychosocial disability, which was conducted in the Netherlands in 1967 by J. Swarte (1969, cited in Brodniak, 2000), and the research undertaken by S. Goodwin in 1997 (cited in Brodniak, 2000) point to a direct connection between knowledge about psychosocial disability and the attitude towards people suffering from it. People with no such knowledge (laymen) perceived the patients as a potential threat to the environment, while those who had information on this subject assessed in this way only 2–3 per cent of the persons with psychosocial disability. These studies are a prerequisite for orienting the activity since they indicate that having contact with persons with psychosocial disability and acquiring the knowledge on this subject can become an effective tool bringing the worlds of the healthy and the ill closer.

The task of the representatives of social professions in the context of the contesting function should be to arrange a confrontation (a meeting) of two social worlds. In this case these are the world of the persons without disability and the world of the persons with disability – perceived as “the world of the Others.” The aim is to create a situation in which the disability people will be able to state, on their own or through a spokesperson, i.e. a social worker, that the society members are mistaken in their assessment of the ill people, which is unfair to them and untrue.
People with a psychiatric diagnosed, such as schizophrenia, are regarded as “incomprehensible” (Jaspers, 1963, cited in Lukas, 2005) individuals, remaining “outside the human community,” (Rumke, 1996) who rejected the social order or negated “the man’s role.” (Shulman, 1968, cited in Lukas, 2005). Their World is the World of the Other and “its image, its mythization, is a cultural phenomenon with a universal nature, this image is neither real, nor verifiable by the reality. Our world of “us” is the only real one, outside its borders there is solely unknown territory (...) The cultural attitude to strangers reminds (...) many elements of numinotic experience. “The Others” are “weird,” “crazy,” “insane,” therefore they cannot belong to an ordered world full of norms.” (Sroczyńska) Given the goals of social work mentioned in the introduction to this paper, a social worker is obliged to fight against this kind of opinions that are harmful for people suffering from psychosocial disability. The immediate symptom of injustice is excluding such persons from the closest environment, or the fear of the problem being disclosed, which is associated with apprehension of rejection. The problem outlined in this way necessitates taking up activity, which will not be addressed to the persons experiencing the problem, but the people who are responsible for their exclusion, and therefore the society. In the following sections, proposals of work with the society will be presented, whose aim is to fight against the stereotypes that are responsible for the adoption of a negative interpretative model towards certain people, in this case, the persons with psychosocial disability. The proposal will be described against the background of the author’s own actions in this matter.

A DOCUMENTARY FILM AND SOCIAL WORK

How do you create a situation that would enable showing the Others that they are mistaken as to the assessment of the world of the excluded? In social work (I mean here the work done in social welfare centers), we most often deal with work based on a direct contact between the client and the social worker. The activities are mainly directed towards the
person who has applied for social assistance. If the client has problems with people living in his/her close environment, in the majority of cases attempts are made aimed at bringing about a change of the attitude of the client to the neighbors, family, etc. As a result of such activity, the client is treated as a person who cannot adapt to life in his/her environment. By failing to try to understand his/her position, the social worker silently supports the others (neighbors, family), and therefore, the need to work with the immediate environment seems to be redundant. Perhaps the person who takes up the activity recognizes that the problem also results from the attitude of the environment in which the client lives, but owing to the fact that there is not much space for the inclusion of others into the activity, or there is no such space at all, what is left is only the work with the client.

A social worker acting as a spokesman would define the source of the problem in a different way. His/her main area of activity would be the society or the people from the client’s milieu, because it is the society (the people) who, due to the fact that it does not understand the world of the client, excluded the client. How do you try to reach out and work with the rest of the society in order to bring about a confrontation between two worlds and try to explain to the society the position of the people excluded from it?

With this relatively “new” area of operation, namely the society, we can work through the media. In particular, I mean here films, which focus on certain categories of persons who are excluded from the collective life. Documentary films would have the task of changing the public awareness by giving the voice to the minority perceptions of the social world. However, to make this happen, we should first consider how to present these perceptions to assure their authenticity. According to me, such documentary should include no external commentary: provided by the authors, experts, etc. A commentary is always someone else’s interpretation. It constitutes a risk of “manipulating” the viewer to adopt the perspective of the commentator, and the idea for such undertaking is to give the heroes a chance to express themselves. We treat the heroes as the sole experts, only they know what they have experienced and what it is like to be in their place. The positions of others will always
be presented through the prism of the profession performed by these persons, for example, if a psychiatrist speaks about a psychosocial disability, he/she will focus on the case study from the point of view of the illness, he/she will look for the deviations from the “medical norm,” etc. Focusing exclusively on what the hero says allows the viewer to experience the “direct” contact with him/her. The hero speaks to the viewer instead of being spoken about by others. This opens up the opportunity for the excluded persons to present their case and, consequently, to gain a chance to resume the broken communication. Hearing the excluded person out can convince the viewer of the illegitimacy of his/her assessment and induce reflection.

The end result of such a film will depend mainly on people who will undertake to prepare it, so the challenge is to try to get rid of the values related to the world of the excluding persons (those constituting the majority) and attempt to understand the world of the excluded people as they see and experience it.

I am not saying that every social worker should now take the camera and document the uniqueness and the normalcy comprehended in another way by the excluded groups. However, the fact that a social worker visits and knows people and places that are avoided by the majority of the population (which leads to the formation of common misconceptions about them) equips him/her with the knowledge that – if utilized – can become a milestone in the fight against stereotypes, discrimination and exclusion. Film directors may have particular sensitivity to social problems, but social workers have the best chance to get to know the world and the problems of the excluded people, because they meet them in their daily work.
“SURVIVAL”

The film, which I have created together with my colleague Łukasz Dębski (a graduate of cultural studies and a graduate of the Faculty of Cinematography of the Łódź Film School), is titled Survival. The main hero and also a co-creator of the movie is Mr. Jerzy Torzewski. Survival is “a story of a man who, despite a difficult childhood, tumultuous past, psychosocial disability and reluctance of the intolerant milieu is trying to lead a normal, honest life, working as a janitor in a tenement house. Although many people cannot accept his unusual appearance and the style of life, he is persistent in attempting to achieve his greatest dream; he wants to become famous to show people that an ill person also can get by in life. The hero seeks to realize his objective, contributing to a film about himself.”

I met Mr. Torzewski during my internship at the Day Psychiatric Ward. He won my sympathy due to his optimism, joy of every little success, consequent pursuit of dreams (his dream then was to get a job as a caretaker in the tenement house where he lived). The first thing that draws the attention of people who meet him is his flamboyant outfit and abundance of jewelry worn by him. The staff of the Ward nick-named him “Beads.” His style concerning clothes was often the reason for harassment and nasty comments made by people.

When I told my friend about Mr. Torzewski, we decided that it would be worthwhile to make a film about him. At the initial stages of our work we did not have one coherent concept and vision for the film. We were not convinced of its social message, either. The most important thing was to do it. Only during the work, and reflecting on it, there revealed the potential of the film and the possibility to use it later. From my perspective, the most important aspect was to work on changing the public awareness about people with psychosocial disability. The film assumed the role of a tool used to fight against stereotypes, exclusion of patients, and to contribute to the dialogue (communication) between the persons with psychosocial disability and the society.

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4 Mr Torzewski agreed to his true name and surname being revealed.
5 The description of the film by Łukasz Dębski.
Working with Mr. Jerzy was a kind of a journey into his world, and we became its explorers. I felt like an anthropologist getting to know “foreign culture” and a social pedagogue who expresses her contestation towards the current treatment of persons perceived as persons with psychosocial disability and who would like changes to occur in this regard. It was surprising that what at first seemed to me strange and unusual about the behavior of Mr. Torzewski, after some time became something very obvious, ordinary and sometimes even necessary. I could quote here a lot of situations, but in this study I will present just one, the most glaring, which Mr. Jerzy told us about. It concerned the fact that our hero burnt down his apartment. For this reason, he was sent to a psychiatric hospital for observation. Getting to know him closer, we had a chance to learn about his motivation, which gave the impetus for such a decision, and we were able to understand why he did it. We stopped to look at this event as something abnormal. We comprehended the whole situation just as Mr. Torzewski understood it then. The emptiness, despair and the desire to draw a thick line separating the present from the past to be capable of creating the future (and so the state that many of us may have already experienced) became clearly visible and wiped away the earlier interpretation of the event. We have seen many times the possibilities of applying an alternative way of interpreting the events that occurred in the life of Mr. Torzewski and contributed to his being treated and perceived as a “lunatic” by others. It became particularly pronounced when we gathered all the material and started working on the montage. At this stage, I, as a layman in these matters, realized the possibilities that the process of film editing entails. I found that this process can lead to the creation of an entirely new product. Bluntly speaking, while editing the material one can manipulate the image, sound, etc. in any way one wishes. The rationale for the statement that our film shows the truth is the fact that we wondered all the time what Mr. Torzewski would have thought about it. Since the material left without any technological processing could be incomprehensible for the viewers, we had to work on it. I called the work, which we therefore performed, “the work of a translator”, who tries to make all statements produced by the hero understandable by the healthy. In the end, this was what we wanted to
achieve. We tried, as those who began to exist simultaneously in two worlds, to assemble the material in such a way as to make the message from our hero comprehensible. We were the only people who “spoke” two languages, and our role was to translate and not to create. We can say that we became the spokespersons not only of Mr. Torzewski, but also of other people who suffer from psychosocial disability. Indeed, it is precisely in the defense of their arguments and interests that the movie was created.

Thanks to the cooperation with Mr. Torzewski we saw the new face of normalcy. I had previously suspected that normalcy can mean something different for everyone and still remain normality and it was reflected in the reality.

OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE USE OF DOCUMENTARY FILM AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL WORK

The first obstacle I see in the use of a movie as an effective tool for social work is the difficulty regarding the dissemination of such material and reaching a wide audience. The recipients of documentary films make a rather limited number of viewers, and television in the most profitable time slots emits something that seems to be more attractive to the average viewer (game shows, serials, etc). Nevertheless, such material can be presented in the classes with students and during educational lessons in schools at lower levels of education. It can become a contribution to the discussion on this topic. The film presentation and the subsequent discussion on it also seem more beneficial since they make it possible to explain the issues that were incomprehensible to the recipients. During the discussion, the spokespersons may take another attempt to defend the world of the excluded against misinterpretation.

The second obstacle, which I think is much more serious and more difficult to solve, is the fact that the dominant opinion of the majority on a particular topic is shared by those representing the minority. The
persons with psychosocial disability think about their disability in the same way as the others do. They give up and do not fight for their rights. The way the phenomenon of psychosocial disability exists in culture, the perception of the ill person as an individual “living outside the community,” “the non-verbalized foundations of all institutionalized procedures that lead to the determination of the person (and eventually the accep-tation of it by the ill person) as a “schizophrenic” – all this eventually becomes the explanation of the experiences of people diagnosed with schizophrenia (Lukas, 2005). As a result, the ill individual gets used to being excluded and begins to believe that it should be like this. Here, a spokesperson’s task would be to make the excluded people aware of their rights. Thus, social work in this respect would not just be working on changing the public awareness about a specific problem, but also influencing the awareness of the groups with whom a social worker wants to cooperate. Another obstacle is related to the “media image” of social workers and the circumstances in which they appear in the media. Currently, most commonly it takes place when there has been some tragedy (e.g. the situation from the Łódź region when murdered children were found stuck in barrels). The worker is then required to explain the situation because usually he/she becomes the first guilty person, i.e. the one that did not prevent such tragedy. This undermines his/her credibility as a man able to solve problems and puts the whole profession in a bad light indicating that social work is ineffective. If social workers appear more frequently in the media not as people who need to explain their failures, but as experts (spokespersons who defend the rights of the excluded), it may change the perception of their role and even affect the social prestige of the profession. Social workers, social pedagogues who want to fight against social exclusion should take into account the power of film/media message, and even when it is not possible for them to stand on the other side of the camera, they should try to act in this field by, for example, striving to get the right to comment on various news and reports dealing with the problems that they are familiar with from their day-to-day work.
Kazimierz Dąbrowski noticed already a long time ago that instead of treating individuals we should work on social relations (1986). Now, we ought to consider the selection of suitable methods. In the text contained above I have tried to present, on the basis of my own project, one of such available methods.

REFERENCES