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# CONDITIONS OF MEDIA AND SOCIAL IMAGE OF THE PUBLIC ASSISTANCE INSTITUTIONS IN POLAND

Michał Szyszka\*

*Janusz Korczak Pedagogical University in Warsaw, Faculty of Social Sciences and Pedagogy in  
Katowice, Katowicka 17, 40-173 Katowice, Poland*

(Received 8 July 2015, revised 26 August 2015)

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## Abstract

The article presents basic factors of perception of assistance and social integration institutions in the media perspective. Compared were surveys carried among the public opinion and workers of assistance institutions about knowledge and social opinions on their functioning, including the media image of this profession. Stereotypically, the image of public assistance institutions is negative and very simplified. The comparison of research results shows that opinions of social workers about their social perception are far more pessimistic than it is in reality; the surveyed people evaluated their image more unfavourably than the respondents who were not employed in institutions. Nevertheless, the mentioned reports and observations clearly indicate the insufficient recognition of the role of social workers and the unfavourable image of social work, especially in the nation-wide media, pointing out to the relatively better cooperation of institutions with regional and local media.

*Keywords:* social assistance, social recognition, social work, media relations, perception

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## 1. The presence of assistance institutions in media and social perception

Over the last few years we have been observing the great interest in various dimensions of effectiveness in the area of social policy. Research studies involve various aspects of communication and organization of activities. Unfortunately, much less effort is directed towards the research studies in the area of public relations of assistance institutions and analyses of media discourse in regard to assistance activities. Thus, we can point out to a significant deficit in this area. So far the subject of image and presence of social assistance in media has been raised by J. Krzyszkowski [1], M. Dudkiewicz [2], M. Rek-Woźniak [3] and M. Szyszka [4]. The latest data regarding social reception of social assistance institutions are provided by the evaluation study of broadcasting effectiveness of the television series *The Deep End* (Polish title: *Głębokawoda*), conducted in 2013 [5].

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\*E-mail: szyszkathome@gmail.com

The recalled reports, comments and research point out to the issues of medial and social stereotyping of welfare institutions, the unfavourable attitude presented by media, the perception of social work in the 'social care' perspective [4, p. 234], the negative image of public social assistance. However, there are still no homogeneous and nation-wide research studies on this matter.

While analyzing the problem of the presence of assistance institutions in mass media from today's perspective, despite the noticeable positive changes that took place in recent years, a conclusion arises that social assistance institutions are in a difficult situation. The conducted research studies reveal that not many assistance institutions workers - despite their activities undertaken in this area - declare good cooperation with the local media representatives and proper preparation of institutions' management staff to contact the media and to build professional relations. Furthermore, there is a belief dominating among the staff about the improper and unjust character of media messages regarding social assistance.

Assistance units are often presented by mass media in an unfavourable, unjust and non-objective manner. This refers particularly to national and gossip media [6]. This fact is connected with the dominant, interventional character of media publications. Moreover, an aversion to journalists can be observed among the institutions' employees and it often results from the incompetence or the abovementioned general, negative tendency. Lack of effective cooperation between assistance institutions and social and media environment, along with the lack of intensified promotional and informational activities are only some of the issues. The contemporary image of social assistance is strongly influenced by: the pragmatics of action - often bureaucratized and dominated by mere distribution of social benefits [7]. On the other hand, an important problem remains, namely the conditions of social perception in which the negative stereotypes and historical, outdated connotations to 'social care' are constituted. This is accompanied by institutions' internal problems which translate into their low prestige: low remuneration of social workers and overload with the number of responsibilities.

Thus, public assistance institutions function in the areas of 'social ignorance' as communities, the audience of mass media messages is aware of their presence, yet their activities are not recognized. According to the studies, community members rarely identify with the missions, goals and work of these institutions. Lack of information and stereotype-based media messages translate into the institutional barriers: lack of knowledge on the undertaken activities, problem solving, etc. Social matters and problems are dehumanized and popular media *key words* such as drug addiction, homelessness, pathology, 'social people' or poverty, tend to overshadow the human factors: tragedies, specific problems of individuals, failures and disappointments but also successes and hopes.

## **2. Stereotyping of social work and social assistance in the public opinion and mass media from the perspective of research studies**

The discussion on the public relations of assistance institutions is even more frequently accompanied by various activities, undertaken on various levels, toward the change of this unfavourable image. An interesting example was creating and co-financing (from the initiative of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy) of the television series about the functioning of assistance centre, titled *The Deep End*.

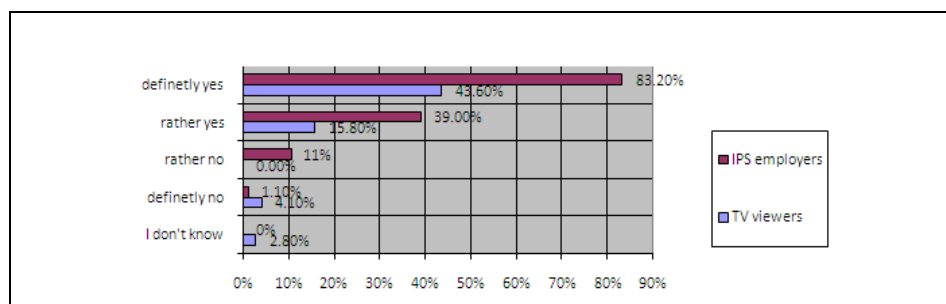
The most up-to-date results regarding the image of social assistance presented in media are provided by evaluation study of the series effectiveness. The research study that was conducted in two independent groups: series audience and social assistance institutions workers, confirms the very low level of knowledge about assistance institutions and their employees.

In the research study, the respondents were asked about their opinion whether the knowledge about social assistance institutions workers and tasks they perform is popularized in the society. As expected, the negative responses prevail in each study group. Only 44.4% of the series spectators (the group representing the general society) stated that this knowledge is sufficiently popularized (7.6% of 'definitely yes' answers, 36.8% of 'rather yes' answers); 55.6% of the respondents think opposite (37.3% of 'rather not', 9.4% of 'definitely not' answers). 9% of the respondents were not able to give a definite answer. An important conclusion is also that the biggest percentage of people (in both groups) thinks that this knowledge is rather not popularized.

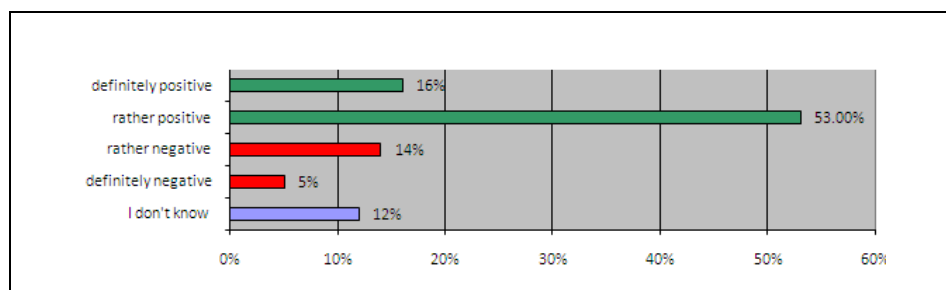
The recalled study is also an attempt to answer the questions about the reasons of such a low level of knowledge about these institutions. The study (the question *Why do you think this knowledge about social assistance institutions is not popularized sufficiently?*) indicates that both TV spectators and institutions employees (the answers are congruent in both groups and waves) think that there is too little information about their institutions activity in media (55% of employees and 44.7% of spectators). According to the respondents, an important reason for that is the fact that local governments (responsible for social policy management) do not inform adequately about the work of these institutions (43.9%). The third most popular answer was that social assistance is the uncomfortable subject to authorities (37.6%) [5, p. 34].

The interesting results that confirm the theses invoked in the introduction are yielded by the answers to the question: *In your opinion, is positive information about social assistance institutions workers and tasks they perform missing in the media?* (Figure 1) As much as 83% of assistance institutions staff and simultaneously 43.6% of spectators think that media lack the positive information about social assistance institutions workers and tasks they perform. Barely 1% of social assistance institution workers and 4% of spectators think this information is not missing in media messaging [5, p. 36]. The characteristic thing is that the lack of presence of the topic in media space has been pointed out

- to a greater extent - by assistance institutions employees who are professionally, thus also emotionally attached to this subject.



**Figure 1.** Evaluation of the accessibility of positive information about IPS in media (How do you evaluate whether media lack positive information about employees of social assistance institutions and tasks they perform?) [5, p. 36]. **Note:** Based on the results of CATI research study among spectators (n = 218) and IPS employees (n = 95).



**Figure 2.** Type of associations with the notion 'social assistance institution worker or social assistance worker' [5, p. 36]. **Note:** Based on the results of CATI research study among spectators (n = 1068).

Therefore, the research study confirm the theses commonly presented in the literature and stating that assistance institutions do not function within the proper range in media messages and that, in turn, translates into the areas of social ignorance. It should not be surprising then, that social assistance is confused with previously authorized 'care' or the activities of non-profit organizations.

### 3. Dissonances in evaluation and perception of social work in Poland

We need to point out that social assistance institutions employees are convinced that their media and social image is highly negative. The research study conducted in 2010 yields interesting results [2, p. 125-127]. The study was conducted in the representative group of social workers. The respondents were asked for an opinion about the character of the most typical social connotations with their work. They could choose maximum three opinions out of the list of ten descriptions proposed by the researchers. The opinions were grouped in three semantic circles: four were univocally negative, four were positive and two were

neutral. The most often chosen positive opinion – ‘helping the needy’ was chosen by slightly more than 25% of the social workers and ‘solving social problems’ - by only 15%. The univocally negative opinions were chosen the most frequently: ‘they help spongers’ (78%), ‘they waste public money’ (43%), ‘they take away children’ (35%) and ‘they are never there when they are needed’ (30%). The opinion - according to the society - that social workers ‘help spongers’ is the strongest among the respondents living in bigger cities (over 100 000 inhabitants), those from older age groups, especially people more than 51 years old (81%) and those with the longest seniority [2, p. 126].

It is worth to compare the above results with the Agrotec research study. On its basis (Figure 2) we can generalize that respondents-spectators declare that their associations with the notion ‘social assistance institution worker or social assistance worker’ are much more positive than is has been indicated by previous analyses and studies [5, p. 36]. The survey pointed out that as many as 53% of the respondents declared their rather positive and 16% definitely positive associations with the description ‘social assistance institution worker or social assistance worker’ (the question: *If you hear the term ‘social assistance institution worker or social assistance worker’ what connotation do you have?*). Only 5% stated clearly negative connotations while 14% - rather negative. The group of the indecisive comprises of 12%.

In the author’s opinion, such polarized associations correspond with the opinions on the character of professional activities of social assistance workers in social assistance institutions. In the respondents’ opinion, adequately to media messages, social assistance institutions deal mainly with the poor, the sick, the disabled and grant social benefits/financial support (which is not totally true). The most popular media connotations are the following: working with the poor, granting social benefits, working with the sick/the disabled, care, working with the helpless, administration, seeming aid, etc. [5, p. 38]. The abovementioned tendencies go in line with the television audience’s connotations about who are the people covered by social assistance. According to the report, the most frequent descriptions are: *poor person, needy person or helpless person*.

Whereas the analysis of media messages carried out by the author during the last 5 years, indicates that this tendency relates not only to public opinion but often to journalists and media employees, and the most content-related errors in presentations of social assistance and integration issues can be found in messages published in electronic media. Social misunderstanding of assistance-related issues, lack of knowledge about the profession and the scope of activities performed by social workers as well as the range of stereotypes regarding the functioning of assistance institutions also contributes to this last tendency.

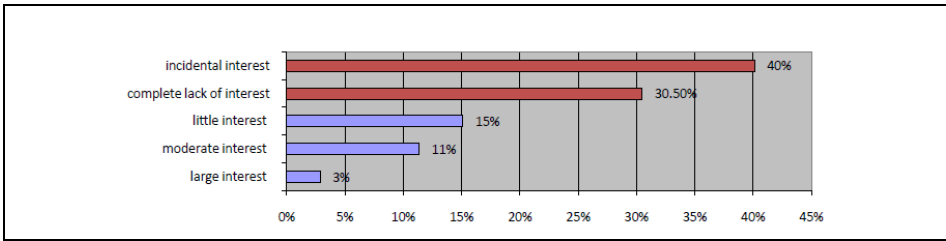
When comparing the results from IPS (Institute of Social Affairs) and Agrotec research studies a conclusion appears that the image of social work and functioning of social assistance institutions in the eyes of their employees turn out to be much more negative than in the eyes of the general public. The comparison reveals that, according to the 3/4 of social workers, assistance provided by the institutions involves first of all ‘helping the spongers’ whereas

in the real social perception (CATI study) as much as 53% of the respondents have rather positive associations and 16% have definitely positive associations. Nevertheless, the research study clearly points out that knowledge about the real conditionings of social work and functioning of assistance institutions is very poorly represented in the social space.

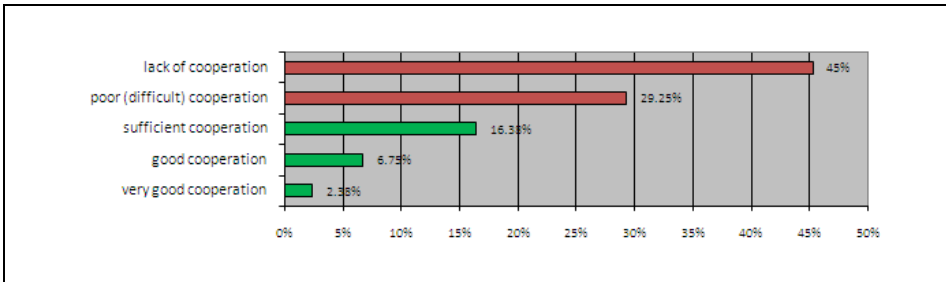
Interesting complementation that helps to interpret the abovementioned compilation is provided by the results of author's own research study. Author's research project involved the study of opinions about the relations of public assistance institutions and social integration institutions expressed by their employees.

In the research study the respondents - representatives of public institutions - were asked about the interest of journalists in the represented institution and assistance activities it performs. The obtained results (Figure 3) correspond with the previously gathered data and observations, namely media content analysis. They depict a very low or a low degree of interest in so called routine, daily activity. The biggest number of indications, namely 40.13%, was given to the answer 'incidental interest' while 30.50% pointed out to 'complete lack of interest'. We need to add that incidental interest involves the so called crisis situations, which are incidents attractive to media from the perspective intervention and supervising function of media and journalism. Little interest was pointed out by 15.13% of the respondents, these answers correspond with the awareness declared by the employees; the awareness as for the necessity to draw the attention of mass communication means. The latter involves conducting an active information policy which may be realized e.g. by institution's spokesman. The smallest group states moderate (11.38%) and large interest 2.88%.

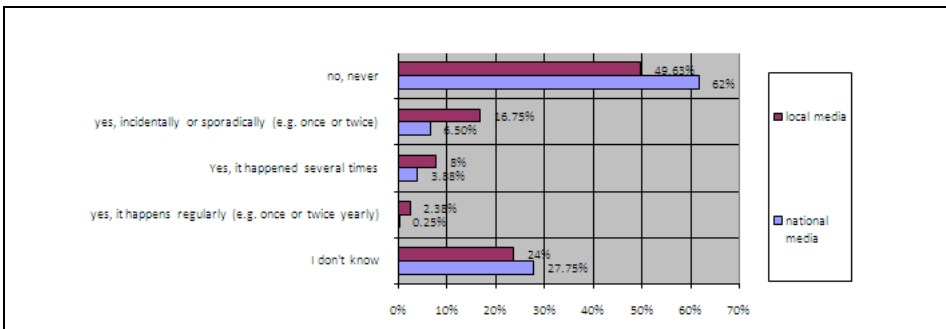
It is worth to recall the answers to the question focused on the evaluation of cooperation between institutions and journalists and, in broader meaning, mass media (Figure 4). Also in this case the obtained information confirms the previous observations that point out to difficult or very difficult collaboration. The vast majority - as much as 45.25% of the respondents point out to the lack of cooperation or poor (difficult) cooperation which may be also interpreted from the perspective of polemics, crisis interventions, attempts to get attention or to improve the negative model according to which assistance institutions are presented in media. Neutral answers (sufficient cooperation) were given by 16.38% of the respondents and only less than 10% evaluated such cooperation as good or very good, respectively: 6.75% and 2.38%. The answers confirm that institutions apply very often the strategy of 'withdrawal' [5, p. 89] and of not taking up the active cooperation with media. Such attitude is often evoked by fear of negative messages, lack of preparation to contact the media as well as widely conditioned belief that the optimal situation for an institution is created by keeping the *status quo* in sharing information. In other words, the management staff do not recognize the need nor the possibility to: promote their institutions in media as open and effective, carry out information policy and develop relations with their institutional and social environment.



**Figure 3.** Answers to the question: *How do you evaluate the interest of journalists and media in the represented institution or activities it conducts?* **Source:** author's nation-wide study, N = 800.



**Figure 4.** Answers to the question: *How do you evaluate the cooperation between your institution and media (journalists, local, professional, municipal media)?* **Source:** author's nation-wide study, N = 800.



**Figure 5.** Answers to the question: *Has your institution been previously unfavorably presented by journalists/employees of nation-wide media and Has your institution been previously unfavorably presented by journalists/employees of local media?* **Source:** author's nation-wide study, N = 800.

During the research study a very interesting correlation, a seeming paradox, was observed (Figure 5). The answers to the question about the previous experiences of the represented institution in the real contacts with nation-wide media (*Has your institution been previously unfavourably presented by journalists/employees of nation-wide media?*) do not confirm the negative tendencies declared by the great part of assistance institutions' employees in the answers presented above and in the available commentaries [8]. Barely 10.5% of

the respondents declared they had experienced a situation when the public assistance unit represented by them was described or presented in the context of crisis situation by the so called mainstream media. The vast majority (almost 90%) has no such knowledge or did not have similar experiences in regard to their work in their institution.

The opinions regarding negative experiences with local media (local newspapers, television, information services, local editions of nation-wide press titles, on-line media, etc.) are structured in a completely different manner. In this area the most noticeable tendency is the one to present institutions in a bad light [9]. However, in this context, we need to pay attention to the specifics of local and professional media which more frequently report on the activities of local institutions. Nevertheless, the results of almost 26% of negative experiences should be considered as moderate, only partially confirming the legitimate character of the declared extreme opinions about the incompetence of journalists and generalization of the negative image of assistance institutions in mass media. In other words, we need to emphasize the subjective aspect of these opinions, expressed mainly by institutions' workers. This reveals a significant cognitive dissonance, shaped by stereotyping of this phenomenon and specific, highly emotional attitude towards the issue of the presence of the reports on institutions functioning in media.

This dichotomy may be interpreted using the phenomenon of cognitive extrapolation. The negative information about the functioning of social assistance institutions is noticed in media and then institutions' employees transfer this information into their own work and their institution, thus becoming subject to the generalization process. This tendency may be one of the keys to answer the question about the aversion of assistance institutions' employees towards mass media and their representatives and thus, towards mutual contacts [10].

#### **4. Conclusions**

The tendencies in the area of presence of the topics related to assistance institutions in media and their social perception form dissonances which, in turn, may be interpreted, among others, using wide social and historical correlations. The latter include the traditions of marginalization of social problems and issues in the public discourse that until 1990 had been monopolized by the state-owned media. An important problem is also the orientation of the assistance system (shaped after the system transformation) towards the distribution of benefits and social compensations (what turned out to be ineffective) and, as a result, intervention character of many of the media reports. Nowadays, the key problem the abovementioned correlations depend, on one hand, on the high stereotyping level of media images presenting social assistance and their interventional character; on the other hand - as revealed by the research studies - the cognitive dissonance among the assistance workers who believe in low prestige of their profession and in unfavourable attitude of media towards them, which is not



always confirmed by reality [11]. The key element is also the negative evaluation of public relations of assistance institutions expressed by their employees in the opinions about cooperation with external environment, media as well as their opinions about low effectiveness of information policy carried out in their institutions. In order to explain the problem of difficult presence of the topics related to social work and functioning of assistance institutions in media, the answers (obtained in the research study) regarding the degree of preparation of the represented institutions to contact media may be crucial. As much as **90%** of the respondents pointed out to the following institutional deficits: 49.88% of the respondents state that their institution is definitely not prepared to contact media and 41.13% state it is poorly prepared. Only 7.13% of the respondents pointed out that such preparation is sufficient and 1.88% that it is good. Thus, we can conclude that assistance institutions are not prepared to carry out media relations. We also need to point out that it is the lack of competence, solutions and preparation in this area that result in the stereotypical fear to contact media representatives and the lack of active information policy and, further, passive strategy in this field. Institutions' representatives who are responsible for institution management lack proper competencies but also there are no effective legal solutions.

Finally, we need to conclude that the low level of relations of public assistance institutions and their incidental, stereotype-based presence in mass media translates significantly to the effectiveness of their activities. It hinders the participation of local environments and actors: communities and institutions. These are important barriers noticed also by institutions' employees and perceived as the ones that hinder work and lower the effectiveness of activities undertaken by assistance (welfare) institutions. This thesis is proved, among others, by the research study conducted by the Regional Centre of Social Policy in Szczecin [12] among the employees of assistance institutions in the region. They point out to the psychological, organizational and formal-legal factors that translate directly into the effectiveness of their work with clients. The interesting thing is that these factors were evaluated as good in most cases. However, the positive motivation to work and good organizational conditions are accompanied by three negative phenomena, namely:

- unsatisfactory remuneration (it is not satisfactory for 76.2% of social workers employed for more than 10 years);
- low (partly shaped by stereotypes) prestige of social workers in the eyes of their clients (indicated by as much as 71.7% of all respondents);
- negative social and media image of social workers: more than half of the respondents think that improvement of such image would lead to even 60-100% increase in the effectiveness of their work with clients.

It must be emphasized that the abovementioned tendencies are painfully experienced by the majority of employees of social assistance centres. It is worth to notice that two of those three barriers directly involve the issue of social perception and presence in the media space. These negative tendencies are very widely recognized on various levels and are the subject of academic and

organizational discourse. Therefore, for the last few years numerous organizational and media activities have been carried out to change the disadvantageous state of matter; there is the most important context of functioning and specific of public media, which transform values and create attitudes [11, p. 238]. Yet, we need to wait until they become effective and their effectiveness can be evaluated.

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