

**Krzysztof Frysztacki**

**Uniwersytet Jagielloński**

**PONDERING SOCIAL ISSUES  
AND THE WELFARE SYSTEM IN POLAND  
THROUGH AN URBAN PRISM:  
THE SOCIAL WORK PROGRAM  
AT THE JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY  
INSTITUTE OF SOCIOLOGY**

**Abstract**

Educational program in social work is being conducted at the Institute of Sociology of the Jagiellonian University. This program is closely connected with urban questions, including phenomena which occur in our City of Cracow. Consequently, it is approach combining urban issues and phenomena which constitute social problems with actions that are rooted in social welfare and social work. Based on that we should build more general picture and also achieve more general experience in the field of social intervention.

**Key words:** social welfare, social work as program of studies, comparative international analysis

This article focuses on two intertwined elements of a pedagogical and research nature. The intention is to indicate a significant line of scholarly investigation and analysis at the Institute of Sociology of the Jagiellonian University. This is an approach combining urban issues and phenomena which constitute social problems with actions and undertakings that are rooted in social welfare and social work.

Here we hasten to explain that the ensuing description will be a rather brief sketch which – following in the footsteps of the more thorough and developed essays by our two American partners – constitutes a supplement concerning distinctive traits found specifically in the Cracow setting.

Returning to the aforementioned duality, in our specific context it has been built on a more general foundation as well as on identifiable historical cornerstones. On the one hand, stretched before us is the broad range of sociocultural problematics – analyzed from the perspective of classic studies to that of a sociological education, through the perspective of cultural anthropology with its queries and approaches, all the way to market research. A theme quite characteristic of this entire spectrum is (among others, of course) the sociology of the city or urban sociology. On the other hand we have social welfare and social work – a field treated as a distinct academic discipline. In Poland,

this is an area of study only recently developing and, in many respects, forging a path that emulates the one taken in the West.

There is no need to underscore that this duality is rooted in both the mainstream of development and specialization as well as in our academic reality. It is a process which deserves its own, separate in-depth analysis. In any case, this is one of the defining factors of our research and education milieu, and it reflects a crucial identity trait of our mission and our work. It is worth noting again that the discussion herein is intentionally modest and aims to distinguish only certain *au courant* phenomena and issues connected with this duality and the analysis trends resulting therefrom.

In examining urban issues, let us call attention to three processes which are directly connected to the realities of social welfare. From the point of view of many, these things are rather self-evident and obvious, but, in the case of our homeland, they are currently felt in full force.

The first of these processes can be described via the universal label of “suburbanization.” Before 1989 the traditional borders between the city and the villages had been very strong; they were visible in both a spatial and social sense. Nonetheless, over the past 10 or 15 years a formidable wave has formed – individuals with a multitude of options and better financial means, moving from the inner cities to the countryside further out. Naturally, this movement bears direct influence on the new social relationships forming, as a consequence, in these rural regions as well as on the ways in which welfare institutions function.

The second process is a relative but more apparent ghettoization evident in symptoms of poverty and social disorganization. This paper has been prepared in Kraków which is the second largest metropolis in Poland, but let us underscore the great value of the research conducted by our colleagues from the only slightly smaller city of Łódź. They have found an increasingly more visible and more fixed concentration of such social problems in specific inner districts of the city. Social work and welfare efforts are, indeed, concentrated here, but assistance is of a peculiar type – a matter to which I will return in a moment.

The third process is an enlarging gap between the possibilities for development and modernization available in the foremost metropolitan centers versus those available in the hundreds of small towns across the country. The stratification would be greater if not for funds flowing from the budget of the European Union, yet this remains one of the factors of fundamental meaning for the Polish social fabric.

All of the above has an impact, too, on the social processes by which social problems are defined. Material issues and matters of disorganization shift decisively to the fore; there is a conviction that winners are lording it over the losers, and that the difference between the haves and the have-nots is too large. This phenomenon has, unfortunately, become typical and is also accruing intensity.

Here it should be added that, when looking at international comparisons, the fissure is not so deep and dangerous – quite the opposite. Nevertheless, we can state that, after the first wave of an “enthusiasm for capitalism,” a longing for the relative egalitarianism

of the past is echoing: it is felt more strongly now than in the first stages of the political and economic systemic transformation of the 1990s.

An example of this is the matter of minimum wages. Not going into great detail here (especially since specific data is absent), at least one million persons in Poland work for 1 to 2 euros per hour. Currently there is an initiative to raise this to approximately 3 euro, but discourse on this topic arouses controversy and anxiety as it is unknown what effect higher wages might have on the labor market. In fact, however, it must be admitted that Poland has exported the greater part of its unemployment sector elsewhere: at least two million persons have emigrated to Western Europe since the accession of Poland into the EU. Although officially less meaningful since registered unemployment is just around 10 percent (the reality goes unknown), this problem is of significance and consequence. A source of one of the key social tensions is a growing conviction that the overall economic progress is not satisfactorily correlated with the real living conditions of many a citizen or his/her family. The pot of gold is only for a select few.

This does not, however, signify a shift of this public discourse towards discussions regarding the ways in which social welfare functions in Poland. Above all, this is a matter for the public sphere found under the reign of local governments which are part of the Polish, rather centralized political system.

What we will note next might sound banal but, in Poland, literally everything has its very deeply rooted historical aspects. If this is found to be true, then – as a matter of course – this pertains also to the realm of social assistance. Here we will illuminate but one regularity.

Let us draw attention to a single attribute. The role of the family has been and continues to be a common core. In Poland this is especially the case – the fundamental nature of the family in social structure, its mirroring of the national community, and its demarcation of the social order. The Polish family is entrenched in each and every one of the elementary axiological and normative dimensions: national law, cultural meanings, the religious context, and dominant customs. Yet the historical whirlwind which is molding our country in a real sense has undermined even this cornerstone: the number of divorces is rising and families are disintegrating as individuals emigrate. This new situation requires adaptation to the changed circumstances, and the main mechanism of adaptation is precisely the social welfare system.

Without going deeply into statistics, some basic indicators are useful in shedding light on this. As expected, the quantitative image is undergoing changes and hence it is not easy to ascertain how many persons actually receive benefits in the households taken under the wings of the social welfare system. That said, we can carefully estimate that 2.5 million persons receive financial subsidies and close to 2 million receive non-monetary forms of assistance. Altogether this means probably over 4 million individuals, about 12 percent of the general population of Poland. Still, the non-monetary forms are, in general, material: they include, for instance, coverage of healthcare deductions or the organization of homeless shelters. Of course, cases overlap to some extent and various forms of help go to the same people.

We are speaking here of more permanent, recurring assistance, but there are forms of occasional, temporary support afforded to all, such as subventions for funerals. However, before reaching this ultimate stage of social subsidy, there are other forms of co-financing which are also potentially open to one and all. A good example is homes for the elderly.

Returning to the more fixed social welfare, this type reaches roughly 2 million households. In fact, these are families and are referred to as such for practical reasons, but primarily for ideological ones. In the overwhelming majority of cases, this kind of help is offered via local social welfare agencies. These agencies are, in turn, subjugated to the local government and authorities, and their existence and functioning depends upon national laws and upon financing from the central, national budget albeit augmented by local taxes. (The newest all-Polish policy supporting financially every second child and next children in each family despite income is officially not part of welfare however in reality started to become important way of social intervention).

Reviewing these remarks thus far, a simple division can be made into two fundamental types of social welfare agency operation. The first of these are benefits, meaning direct monetary assistance and other forms of support for the disadvantaged availing themselves of these services. The second of these is social work broadly understood which aims to fortify those individuals and groups towards whom it is directed. The division into these 2 types has considerable influence on everyday life.

Here again we can return to Kraków for an example. The City Welfare and Social Work Center (abbreviated as “MOPS” in Polish) is a large employer which directly hires staff; additionally, there is the personnel of cooperating institutions and NGOs. There is no need to emphasize that this potential employment is attractive for the ranks of our students and graduates. Our Institute cooperates with MOPS on a daily basis; we are conscious of the fact that division into these two types of intervention has consequences for internal dynamics and even for certain internal tensions. Managing benefits is very time-consuming and exhausting, but a “certainty.” On the other hand, doing social work can be both empowering and highly creative; it permits greater independence and self-reliance. Still, it seems risky – especially during clashes with unpredictable clients or situations.

The granting of benefits often demands a nerve-racking confrontation with those welfare recipients, as well as a concurrent adaptation to bureaucratized procedures (personally, the author of these words would hesitate to perform such work and has great regard for persons who do this for a living). From the perspective of a professional career, decisive are personal diagnoses, above all in the places where recipients reside; interviewing becomes a tool for testing out the circumstances of specific persons and their families.

Social work is thus treated as a mechanism which is to render the circumstances of such individuals, their families, and their milieu “better” – whatever this word might mean in various conditions. We must admit that the national statute regarding social work and social welfare focuses on a need for engagement by social workers and, hence, it gives them free rein to delineate the extent of their involvement and activities (although

not such an extent as to over-generalize). Here let us identify and list five such officially recommended approaches:

1. Occupational therapy and social rehabilitation with specific consideration of various therapy workshops;
2. Family clinics and family therapy;
3. Crisis intervention (especially if domestic violence is manifested);
4. Working on behalf of the disabled with reference to employment, to finding an apartment, or to taking advantage of culture and recreation;
5. Cooperation with institutions in order to erase all physical boundaries.

It is clear that these pointers and lines of action are especially intertwined with urban realities and correspond with the institutionalization, professionalization, and specialization which are appropriate for the functioning of urban or even metropolitan communities. Of all the more importance is the entanglement of the qualities of urban life with those of social welfare and social work .

As we gradually reach the finish of this discussion, let us investigate the latest and loudest voices in Polish mass discourse which emphasize a need to rethink the “new” social assistance and “new” social welfare. This comprises a debate which is ongoing and therefore we cannot point to a single, self-evident conclusion. Yet we can point to three characteristic traits.

Firstly, there are attempts made to use Western cases as reference points. It is important, however, to note that such interests in foreign realities have already been many and we traditionally aim to look through the window at the outside world. Nonetheless, once again there is a readiness to work with double the energy towards the typical finish line models which tend to be the USA or some Scandinavian country.

In the case of America this relates, among other things, to the question of whether the conflict between the conservative and liberal perspectives might yield something of significance to us. Both viewpoints seem attractive. For the conservatives, slogans such as “family,” “freedom,” and “private sector employment” do ring true for our Kraków society. Yet also popular is a belief that one should develop and reinforce the interventions of the state and its institutions – something which aligns Poles with American liberalism. A strong accent on private property, governmental engagement and activity, and, finally, NGOs – this is the triangle of whose power and advantages we are convinced.

With the case of Scandinavia, it serves as a (shining) example of the welfare state. For many Poles this represents an unattainable level of the transfer of resources and activities on behalf of a society in the hands of its state which, in turn, makes the best use of these. We should, however, consider the fact that, as of late, we have been facing a turn towards the privatization of state social welfare involvement while simultaneously moving towards a socialization augmenting the influence of social, not bureaucratic forces.

The second trait is an increasing feeling that we must reinforce informal care of non-independent individuals. This is the category of humans currently most threatened by

exclusion on many levels – wages, occupation, health, and the social. These persons are especially dependent upon the informal care offered by their family and friends – which, as a result, can lead to the exclusion of these very family members and friends who deserve support instead. This comprises one of our challenges.

The third characteristic is the problem of criminality and retributive policies. Examining European indicators, Poland is a country with a rather strict penal code (albeit not as radical as that found in the USA) – and this code basks in a solid level of social support. All the same, here and there voices are breaking through which postulate more social processes of penance and punishment. Perhaps the answers could be found, for instance, in the functioning of local societies and the benefits stemming therefrom. This would require a certain infrastructure which cannot be created in the metropolis. Social workers and others in the helping professions do have an obvious role to play in this regard.

To conclude, let us simply state that social work in Poland will in the foreseeable future continue to change and modernize. Crucial in this process are the cities: what happens in the cities will always have a vital impact on social issues and the welfare system in Poland.

Finally – by way of an afterword – we return to the endeavors of the Department of Applied Sociology and Social Work, a key team of scholars at the Jagiellonian University's Institute of Sociology. Below are but a few of the monographic studies which represent the lines of investigation found in this institution:

- Frysztacki K. (2029). *Socjologia problemów społecznych*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa.
- Frysztacki K., Nózka M., Smagacz-Poziemska M. (2011). *Dzieci ulicy. Studium szczególnego problemu miejskiego*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków.
- Miś L. (2007). *Problemy społeczne. Teoria, metodologia, badania*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków.
- Miś L., Nózka M., Smagacz-Poziemska M. (2011). *Nasze problemy. Bieda i bezrobocie we współczesnym społeczeństwie polskim*. Universitas, Kraków.
- Nózka M. (2016). *Spoleczne zamykanie (się) przestrzeni. O wykluczeniu, waloryzacji miejsca zamieszkania i jego mentalnej reprezentacji*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa.
- Smagacz-Poziemska M. (2015). *Czy miasto jest niepotrzebne? (Nowe) przestrzenie życiowe młodych mieszkańców miasta*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa.

A consequence of the above will be further scholarly inquiries. Ongoing research will certainly lead to more such publications.