

# Excluded and Humiliated



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### What do people living in poverty think and feel? How do they respond to the situation they find themselves in? How do others react to their poverty?

Contemporary sociologists are not only concerned with the most evocative and moving aspects of poverty, such as extreme destitution, homelessness, and starvation, the difficulties and coping mechanisms of people struggling with insufficient basic means of survival; they also stress the importance of the relational, symbolic, and subjective dimensions of poverty as a complex phenomenon. The great Polish-émigré sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has shown that the humiliation suffered by the poor today is the most important factor characterizing their position; it is equivalent to the exploitation that has played a crucial role in past centuries and systems. Numerous researchers and experts on the issues of poverty, including Bronisław Geremek, Pierre Bourdieu, Oscar Lewis, and Father Józef Wrzeński, indicate that it is essential for scholars to understand the conditions experienced by the poor and the excluded; they postulate that we should learn what the poorest think and feel when confronted with people and institutions rooted in a world that has not experienced poverty.

### Studying poverty

The concept of subjective aspects of poverty and related phenomena such as unemployment are nothing new to social scientists. The well-known "Great Depression diaries," for instance, paint an image of the psychological consequences of unemployment: the attitudes and emotions evolving from a sense of hurt, fear, and depression, through apathy and a feeling of helplessness, all the way to a resignation to one's fate and a state of oversensitivity. Feelings of degradation, humiliation, and worthlessness are also characteristic in people who lose their jobs and find themselves in poverty; they have been described in the more contemporary "unemployment diaries"

submitted to a competition held in 2000 by the Institute of Social Economy at the Warsaw School of Economics.

There have also been qualitative studies based on direct contact between the researcher and the reality being studied, that is, through interactions with poor people themselves, with their everyday practices and ways of fulfilling their basic needs in an environment where the appropriate means are lacking, rife with access barriers and various shortages. Studies of public opinion and discourse are important in the assessment of the relational dimensions of poverty – how the poor are perceived and treated. A study under the joint title "The Discourse of Poverty and Social Exclusion" is being conducted by a team of young researchers under my direction, as part of a research project financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. The project aims to analyze how poverty is depicted in Polish academic and political discourse, in selected media and popular culture, in the practices of educational institutions and social welfare centers, as well as in activities of non-governmental charities. The hypotheses we are verifying concern the presence or absence of the subject of poverty in particular discourses; opportunistic interest in the subject when linked to sensational events in the news; politicizing and instrumental treatment of poverty; and the presence or absence of stereotypical, negative portrayals of poverty in specific discourses, containing elements stigmatizing the poor.

### Self-perceptions among the poor

One of the sub-studies within the project is entitled "The Poor on Themselves," thematically and methodologically rooted in the research carried out by the British scholar Ruth



According to Poland's Central Statistical Office (GUS), over 2 million Poles live in abject poverty, with a further 6 million experiencing severe difficulties



Arkadiusz Gola

People who live in poverty experience various forms of exclusion and humiliation

Lister. As part of the project, groups of people who live in poverty or have done so in the past discussed their ways of defining poverty, its causes and effects, their strategies for dealing with these problems, the portrayal of poverty in the media and policy, and their views on how the poor are perceived and treated by those who have not experienced poverty themselves. The aim of the study was to learn and reconstruct the thoughts and feelings of people who know poverty from the inside; to draw upon their reflections, opinions, and views. In February and March 2011, three discussion meetings were held with mothers from former collective farms, with young adults, and with a mixed age group of men and women who struggle with poverty while living in average-sized towns.

### Poverty is suspicious

The study revealed that poor people associate poverty with sadness, dilemmas, and difficulties in everyday life. Black despair, uncertainty, anxiety, fear for the future, and worrying about day-to-day living, sensing disregard, contempt, and a lack of respect from others are just some of the terms that frequently came up in the conversations. Apart from – or irrespective of – the issue of money, people in poverty feel most affected by a lack of understanding and support. Their most difficult experiences are often negative attitudes and responses from those around them. “Those rich people,” said one respondent when asked about his most difficult poverty-related experiences, “the humiliation by others who see themselves as superior.” “The sense of humiliation – that’s worse than the poverty,” another said. The discussions featured many examples of institutions and situations where poor people feel shame, humiliation, embarrassment, and a sense of contempt in which they are held: “Officials really make sure you feel it.” On social welfare centers and contacts with social workers, respondents said: “You feel like you are somebody worse than them – I’d much rather go out to work, clean, anything”;

“They don’t help you unless you go and suck up to them.” Employers take advantage of those most in need by giving them “the most humiliating jobs” and addressing them with disdain. In hospitals, wealthier patients are treated better than poor ones: “The nurses were more caring, attended to them more frequently, were kinder. Poorer people don’t get anything.” In schools, “poverty is reflected on children,” which results in lower grades and unfair treatment from teachers, as well as poor children being excluded by their peers who treat them as inferior. Poorly dressed people are treated suspiciously in shops and their purchases are closely examined: “Generally, being poor is regarded as something suspicious.” Friends and even family turn away from people affected by poverty: “When you lose money, you lose many acquaintances.” Various forms of exclusion and humiliation lead some informants to state: “I feel like I’m in an inferior category of humans” or “You end up being sidelined.” According to one of the young participants, those attitudes cause the poor to fall into apathy, which is a “slippery slope – so what if you want to pull yourself out, when you just keep getting knocked back down?”

There are many other issues linked with the subjective perception of poverty that cannot be discussed here for reasons of space – they include the perception of poverty and poor people in the context of social pathology and associations with crime, as well as the stress associated with meeting daily needs and fears for the future. I have focused on the issues of humiliation, degradation, and a sense of contempt, since they are not sufficiently well covered in scientific research or public discourse. ■

#### Further reading:

- Bauman Z. (2006). *Praca, konsumpcjonizm i nowi ubodzy*. Tłum. Obirek S. Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM.
- Lister R. (2007). *Bieda*. Tłum. Stanaszek A. Warszawa: Sic!
- Poznać, co myślą najbardziej. Numer tematyczny *Kultury i Społeczeństwa*. T. LIV, 2010.