Inga B. Kuźma

Homes of the Homeless

A Study of Life in Crisis

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I don't think ethnologists have
a well-defined social responsibility.
I believe everyone should decide
for himself

(Goody 1996)

1. ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDIES
ON PREDICAMENTS AND CRISES:
HOMELESSNESS AND 'HOMEFULNESS'

I decided to look into the crisis problem of homelessness, which I also regard as a predicament.[1] I also wanted to present as much as possible of my way of conducting research in a field that I also consider to be a difficult one. I worked in places which could be regarded as total institutions (Goffman 1961), i.e. in centers providing aid to homeless people. 'The crisis' refers to borderline and related experiences. It refers to obstacles such as breakdowns or illnesses that may affect individuals and larger groups. These can be internal conflicts, i.e. those that relate to one's emotional state, or to community issues such as economic or political problems. The term crisis could also be used to describe life in a special (socio)therapeutic facility, such as a refuge of a night shelter. The earliest appearance of the notion of 'crisis' can presumably be tracked down to Erik Erikson's (1994) research on the dynamics of human existence and the biographical processes that he conducted to describe the theory of psychosocial development. Erickson saw development as a series of successive conflicts and ways of dealing with them.

'The crisis' need not be considered only in a negative sense, even though it usually involves losing control over a situation and having no idea how to handle it. A change in a state of affairs translates into a life breakthrough, which sometimes results in improving the situation. There are no fixed and verifiable scenarios that would facilitate surviving such a moment. However, some phases may be distinguished. The first is denial of the events, which are usually unexpected, and this is followed by an evaluation of the situation, marking the beginning of the 'process of coping' with difficulties. An evaluation of the re-

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[1] In other words, they are 'minefields', taboo subjects, sensitive issues. They are challenging and sometimes provoke scientific and human transgression as regards the research procedures and methodology, and to some extent the researcher, too. This also includes situations the studied subjects have found themselves in and the research area, which consists of the issues that are socially problematic and marginalized (Kuźma 2013a: 8–9).

sources, opportunities and measures available to the group of person then takes place. This leads to the third phase: deciding what can be done. Any challenges faced at this moment help to reveal resilience or lack thereof (Skłodowski 2010: 12–13). Entering into a crisis may also bring an awareness of the degree to which previous life experience is incompatible with new circumstances and requirements, resulting in confusion and calls for reorganization of life. Before the decision-taking process starts, the person or group may feel as if they have lived a life in "suspension". The few feelings which are available at that phase include a sense of inability, nonsense and meaninglessness (Sacuk 2010: 63).

In this study, I discuss the social concept regarding excluded people. My interpretations have also a diagnostic function. I do not hide my criticism toward the studied situation and I try to describe the cultural background which underlies it. This situation is fraught with strong stereotypes about poverty, homelessness and gender.

During my research on the crisis of homelessness and the situation brought about by staying in shelters and other facilities, I became interested in what 'home' meant to the people who lived in such places. I wanted to show the attitude that people experiencing homelessness took toward habitation, and I wanted to explore whether, and how, the concept of home and their experience of it influenced their view on the situation they were facing. I also wanted to describe the cultural projection and social training they underwent to become a 'full-fledged' member of the group, where the image of home and habitation-related skills serve as a kind of 'testing ground'. This means that the correct habitation practices – as required of the residents in the facilities concerned – become tantamount to independence and a manifestation of their social 'health'.

For me, this entailed the need to take a transdisciplinary approach, i.e. to construct a conceptual and interpretive framework encompassing various scientific and non-scientific perspectives, even though my starting point was that of ethnology and anthropology. In this way, I was able to study the highly complex issue in question. It was due to the complexity of the field of study, i.e. homelessness and home, that I opted for transdisciplinarity.

> In contrast to interdisciplinarity, which does not affect the field of study of the included disciplines, transdisciplinarity deals with problems that are impossible to solve within any of the disciplines and leads to establishing a new field of study. A study that was designed as transdisciplinary research often does not have any specific new area but it rather depends on the issues to be explored (Domańska 2011: 56).

'Homelessness' is a 'bad abstraction' or 'chaotic conception' (Sayer 1992: 138). Patrick Declerck notes that many researchers (including Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss)

had skimmed over […] the questions it provoked. As if this issue was not worthy of being studied, dirty and dim, because how can you do research based on something that only barely exists or does not exist at all? What can you say about the epistemological status of ethnography of disorder, chaos and nothingness? The situation is aggravated by the fact that tramps are not a community that you could define easily. […] Communities of unstable, […] silent people and/or ones that call each other names in delirious fits (Declerck 2004: 13–14).

When attempting to approach and define 'homelessness', one must therefore bear in mind that it is a complicated phenomenon, or in other words, an intricate one, as it encompasses many reasons and factors which are independent of one another and have different properties. Homelessness is also complex, because it functions as a system of interconnections between these factors (Fitzpatrick 2005: 11). The existing definitions and typologies of homelessness and the people whom it affects are overlapping and complementary, with none of them being exhaustive (Szluz 2010b: 113). The situation of homelessness may affect adults, the young, the elderly, children, persons living on their own or in families. Among homeless people, it is possible to distinguish a subgroup with problems of a mental or emotional nature (Toro, Janisse 2004: 245). Such groups are also found among prisoners, potentially homeless people, those threatened with eviction, those staying in hospitals or those with no contact with their families (including persons with mental disorders) (Szluz 2010b: 114). In other words, these groups may include the actual and potential homeless alike: people who experience homelessness entirely or those who do so partially. The latter can include those who live in temporary accommodation and do not have their own place of residence, or may a place to live, but for some reason do not want to stay there, or persons on whom homelessness was imposed and are either able or unable to live their lives independently, or those who chose to be homeless and again, are able or unable to live independently. Within this group, it is possible to distinguish people from shelters, the street, the voluntarily homeless (to some extent this category overlaps with homelessness by choice,[2] which some researchers also believe to exist) and people who suffer from forced homelessness. They include both the long-term and short-term homeless, and those who are 'frictional', i.e. those who find temporary accommodation in residential areas, e.g. during seasonal work (see also Toro, Janisse 2004: 244–245). When discussing its duration, homelessness can

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[2] This issue raises objections, also in myself; I do not know anyone who is homeless by choice. Another issue is the strategy of reconciling the *status quo*. For example, in Beata Januchta's documentary *Wyobcowani* (Alienated), the then head of the Albert Chmielowski Aid Society (TPBA) in Wrocław stresses that homelessness takes place out of necessity rather than by choice.

be described either in a strict sense, i.e. real or apparent homelessness (when a person does not have any accommodation or other premises of residential nature), and in a broad sense; this can be further subdivided into hidden and social homelessness – for example, when the owned place does not meet housing conditions, i.e. when it does not comply with the minimum standards (Szluz, 2010b: 115). The perspective adopted in a given discipline or in practice, e.g. local, experience can also have an influence on the way homelessness is understood (Stankiewicz 2002: 20).

Many organizations in Europe have adopted the view proposed by the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA). The FEANTSA view highlights the dynamic nature of homelessness. Some people who experience homelessness very often change their place of residence, while others recursively show up in all sorts of places, making use of help provided by their friends or family. They also end up in shelters, prisons and hospitals. A group seeking to escape violence experiences "only" episodes of homelessness and then finds refuge in a variety of locations, sometimes also at their close relatives and friends. Usually, they leave home for a short time, and if there is no change in their situation (i.e. they do not break their violence-based relationships), they return to the well-known paradigm within the four walls of their houses. The FEANTSA highlight the need to inquire into the causes of homelessness, be it episodic, short-term, scarce or shelter-free. The reasons for homelessness are often hard to determine; in this case prevention, or prophylaxis would be of key importance. In 2004, to standardize the collection of data and make it comparable and usable for creating aid programs in various countries, FEANTSA developed the European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS). The ETHOS typology puts emphasis on the lack of housing and shelters and on their types and quality. Based on this classification, it is possible to be endangered with homelessness and excluded in terms of housing, but not be homeless yet. FEANTSA distinguishes three basic types of exclusion, i.e. exclusion from the physical,[3] legal and social areas, and these need to occur jointly to result in homelessness. Physical exclusion means deprivation of space to live in. Legal exclusion is the lack of an exclusive right to the occupied area, while social exclusion means a lack of privacy, which is needed to ensure security and to develop social relationships. Homelessness can also occur when someone has a place to live in that in accordance with housing standards, and so is not excluded physically, but does not have the exclusive legal right to the occupied space, which implies legal exclusion. At the same time, such persons may be deprived of the privacy that would give them

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[3] See also eg. Dambuyant-Wargny 2004.

a sense of security and the chance to shape their relationships freely (therefore they are affected by social exclusion). The conditions 'without any roof over your head' and 'no place of residence' force those affected by either a triple exclusion (legal, physical and social) or double exclusion (legal and social) to look for places in refuges and night shelters, on the street and elsewhere.

The contemporary discourse used in aid organizations, including non-profit ones, and the State administration institutions that are meant to handle social problems is built around 'evidence' and 'facts'. It is based on calculating various parameters to describe people in need as accurately as possible. This gives us hope to control the unpredictability of homelessness. Although many of the factors that cause homelessness and facilitate it, such as unemployment, alcoholism, domestic violence or economic crises, are already well recognized (Dębski 2010: 52–94, Abucewicz-Szcześniak: http://www.ipsir. uw.edu…), this does not mean that it is possible to eliminate them. Michel Foucault asserts that there is no power which would not be linked with knowledge (Foucault 1995; see also Bińczyk 1999). An example of such ordering and systemizing initiatives to make homelessness more controllable and to facilitate and enhance the effectiveness of support actions is that based on counting the homeless, including the subgroup that lives in shelters (http://www.mops. lodz.pl …).[4] Data about the number of people resident in shelters during the census, and the residences and numbers of homeless staying outside of such facilities reflects the size of the group that receives support and the number of people who are not covered yet. One of the most tangible forms of the aid system accepted in Poland, as part of the current approach to solving problems of homeless people, is the creation of specialized institutions, financed from public funds or by NGOs.

For the system, it is therefore very important to determine the number of persons residing inside and outside of shelters, because it would define the scale and scope of support.[5] When people reside in such facilities, it is possible to include them in programs intended to take them out of homelessness. In many institutions, undergoing such a program adjusted to the individual situation of the person concerned is almost a prerequisite for getting any assistance.

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[4] Additional data on the number of homeless people in Poland, was also provided by the *Polish National Census of Population and Housing* from 2011. It should be noted, however, that census was carried out in the spring, when very many people without a fixed home decide to live outside the institutions for the homeless. For this reason, it is a flawed tool for studying this group. It does not take into account their life dynamics, which is based on their seasonal and spatial mobility.

[5] In accordance with the Polish Act on Social Assistance of 12 March 2004 – see Article 16, 17 and 48.

These actions provide continual updates of the official data on homelessness. Despite their wide dispersion in urban areas, people without a home are included in various official statistics. EU Member States are obliged to implement this methodology pursuant to the Resolution of the European Parliament of 14 September 2011 (para. 6), which reads as follows: "the following key elements of homelessness strategies should be monitored and reported upon: […] proper data collection" (http://www.europarl.europa…). This is due to the fact that people without a home must be provided with support, and such activities require funds that are calculated based on the number of people in need.

The scope of the notions of 'home' and 'homefulness' is as wide as that of 'homelessness', and equally varying in historic and cultural terms. They are all marked emotionally, even in Western research culture, as reflected in their definitions and research procedures, also with regard to various forms of housing. The concept of 'home' is connected with 'homefulness', a term used mostly in the jargon of non-governmental organizations and persons under their care (see, for example, Łojewska 2006). In a way, this term is opposed to homelessness. It introduces a marked qualitative difference between the two ways of functioning, i.e. with and without a home. 'Homefulness', a word coined to describe having your own roof over your head, draws attention to the aspect of life which is commonly considered to be natural. According to the non-reflective view of reality, it is homelessness that should be treated as something abnormal. The creation of the term 'homefulness' reverses the 'natural' logic and demonstrates the specific nature of life under the roof of one's own place of residence called home, and why it requires certain cultural resources. For this reason, such a life should not be taken for granted, for it requires skills that are acquired by operating in a specific environment. The observation of those experiencing homelessness, especially in aid centers, reveals the behaviors and actions that are used to create their own environment, to delimit borders, to recognize who they are and what they belong to. Among other things, this is what creating a home and living there are all about. The implementation of this type of idea has its own phases and takes place with various intensity, which may be seen in the institutions.

Entering an area where homelessness is subject to repair practices and various restrictions, as is the case of aid institutions, I did not stop only at the individual experiences of people experiencing homelessness. They led me further on to the so-called *hidden curriculum*.[6] This principle underlies the organization of

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[6] The concept of '*hidden curriculum*' is related to research in the educational system. It concerned the role that the school and educational system play in socialization. The researchers were interested not only in what was transferred, but also to whom, by whom and in what manner, what was the rationale behind the knowledge, its form, objectives and the style of communication—see Jackson

the institutions, i.e. all the assumptions needed to provide the aid, and therefore the idea of what homelessness is, how to 'unlearn' it and 'lead out of it', and how to include the people who experience it in the *mainstream* of society.

Both aid center employees and welfare recipients, as well as other members of society who are not directly involved in these areas, all act within the framework of a broader social concept that makes the current aid ideology. It shapes the Polish legislation, the social welfare sector and the common attitude towards the so-called 'excluded people'. The *homo sacer* is still treated ambivalently, with a mixture of fear and disgust on the one hand, and regret and compassion on the other (Bauman 2006b). In relation to such individuals and groups, living in the environment of "the culture of consumption and individual success", attitudes of "contempt, a sense of alienation and rejection" prevail (Tarkowska 2012: 122).

Support can be grouped into several basic schemes or ideologies of aid (Frieske 2001: http://www.bratalbert.org/tl_files/brat_albert/pdf/konferencja%202001/frieske.pdf). They stem from two approaches. The first one asserts that there is no point in taking action, including supportive action, without systematic knowledge of the world or adequate procedures to use that knowledge, whereas any action should be reasonably justified (this would in a way be compliant with FEANSTA's activity). The second approach favors 'roadmap' actions, so it is preferable to break procedures and adapt to circumstances. The procedures are not treated as definitive and determining factors, as this could increase the costs, also the costs related to support provision. Acting in a schematic way provokes mistakes—it does not facilitate an adequate reaction to the situation, which in the case of homelessness, for example, is variable, uncertain and diverse; it is structural and individual at the same time.

These two approaches have resulted in ideologies of aid given above. The first type of aid ideology focuses on mercy. It is not important, therefore, how homelessness is defined, apart from a simple indication that it is connected with "human suffering, […] so severe that it induces people to ask for help. And, according to the proponents of this way of thinking, it would be very bad if anyone was to find out that there was no one to turn to" (Frieske 2001: http://www.bratalbert.org/tl_files/brat_albert/pdf/konferencja%202001/frieske.pdf). The aim of this ideology is to protect the homeless from degradation (deprivation). It is also about proving that homelessness is not a reason for being rejected. Most often, the merciful attitude occurs during spontaneous actions,

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1968 (this researcher introduced the concept of *hidden curriculum*) and Giroux, Purpel 1983 (who developed the critical current in pedagogy); Janowski 1995 (the first Polish researcher to introduce the term *hidden curriculum* in the literature of the field and educational research). The issue of the *hidden curriculum*, also construed in a broader sense, was also studied by researchers such as Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich and bell hooks.

e.g. carried out at the outbreak of a crisis, during suffering or associated with a difficult condition. This includes initiatives such as "Food not bombs" and all other nutrition and medical actions carried out by various organizations. Such aid is typically provided unconditionally. This ideology includes individual gestures, spontaneous reactions to remedy someone's misfortune, and is driven by compassion or empathy.

The other ideology draws on the concept of reintegration. Is based on the view that homelessness is "atrophy of the basic relationships with others" (Frieske 2001: http://www.bratalbert.org/tl_files/brat_albert/pdf/konferencja%202001/frieske.pdf). The proponents of this concept do not delve into the reasons for disappearance of such bonds. They merely assume "the lack of basic social skills, disregard for the duties that arise from any conceivable form of human coexistence, excessive drinking, helplessness, etc." (Frieske 2001: http://http://www.bratalbert.org/tl_files/brat_albert/pdf/konferencja%202001/frieske.pdf). In such a situation, the aid consists in subjecting the charges to "some sort of order of collective life. Sometimes this order reflects the order of society at large" (Frieske 2001: http://www.bratalbert.org/tl_files/brat_albert/pdf/konferencja%202001/frieske.pdf). Beneficiaries of such forms of aid should then demonstrate their willingness to live in this way. They must deal with various issues related to their lives and act to improve their own situation. This aid ideology is based on the principle that to change one's life, it is necessary to set one's own goal, and, for example, that those affected by homelessness should strive to stop being homeless. Reintegration is most vividly present in public institutions and, to a varying extent, in the majority of institutions run by competent associations and foundations.

The third ideology of aid is related to the autonomy of the 'exclude persons'. They begin to create "their own social order which, due to its structural characteristics, does not necessarily coincide with the order of society at large" (Frieske 2001: http://www.bratalbert.org/tl_files/brat_albert/pdf/konferencja%202001/frieske.pdf). This is how the ideology of "the community of the rejected ones" is born, i.e. they form alternative groups, social micro-worlds or specific co-operatives. In this way, they show socialization, but this does not necessarily lead them on to enter the wider social system. The features of this aid system are most visible in the centres run, for example, by MONAR, Barka or Community "Chleb Życia". In a sense, these are self-sufficient communities. They prove that rejected individuals, for whom there was and perhaps still is no place in the current mainstream value system, are capable of creating a world for themselves to "recover". However, they do not separate themselves from "the outside world" entirely and they enter into coalitions with it, draw on it, (re)adapt to a certain extent, but full integration is not their only goal. For the members of such groups, it is not so important to go back to their former place

or find a new niche in the system from which they once came, were thrown out or never belonged to; they aim at making a change for a deeply internalized reason that motivates them to strive to transform themselves. These groups are characterized by attitudes similar to those of converts, and those who find their vocation in life. This can also be seen in the members of the Anonymous Alcoholics, where some of the aid centres residents that I met had been recruited.

By including some elements of collaborative anthropology in my work, I aimed to highlight the aspects of cooperation and partnership, which according to this approach, lie at the core of the 'research contact' (Fluehr-Lobban 2013: 8. see also Rappaport 2013). One of the most important forms of research activity within participatory anthropology is conversation (*cf.* Fluehr-Lobban 2013, Rappaport 2013). It can take place as a free talk or a deliberate discussion to reach a consensus or to arrive at a compromise on a given issue. A conversation can be conducted to establish a position or share one's opinion, present experience and exchange knowledge, be it everyday or expert. However, the meetings at which people talk are considered activities because they give the participants an opportunity to express themselves and to define their positions. They consist in determining the speaker's standing (see Haraway 2008). This means that a person perceives the world, interprets it and works within it in a certain way. In the context of aid institutions, a conversation can also to some extent be a liberating practice, and this is particularly important while working with excluded people and those who are regarded by the *mainstream* as the *underclass*.[7]

One of such conversations was my interview with "Dominika", an 18-year-old resident of a women's shelter at that time. She is the author of the key concept I adopted, which allows me to understand what it means to live in an institution and what a "home" is. She also posed another problem which became the fundamental axis of this book.

First of all, she used the phrase "an imitation of home", which I have adopted and now apply in my study with the whole context in which she used it. With this expression, she described the rules of staying in the shelter. For me, this expression has become the basic category to explain the "homeness" of these institutions and the meaning of the ideology underlying the aid system there. Another source of inspiration for interpreting shelters as imitations of home was the concept of "unhome" by Magdalena Łukasik and Marcin Jewdokimow (2012).

Secondly, "Dominika" concluded that society was not adapted to people experiencing homelessness. Although the community requires specific behavior from such individuals, the expectations are not implemented effectively,

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[7] Other activities that I undertook were connected with *participatory action research* (Greenwood 2012: 116, 199), especially when the topic concerned women's cultural issues and when the activities were oriented at women.

in many cases integration does not take place and the aid is ineffective. Thus "Dominika" raised the issue of responsibility of the dominant culture, which in her opinion, was not compliant with the people whom it excluded. How could, then, the *mainstream* evolve when trying to change the excluded persons in order to incorporate them? This, in turn, is the aim of the current aid system.

My interlocutor suggested a route by which I could overcome this lack of adaptation. She felt that some beneficiaries of the aid should be compelled to implement the process of changing themselves and their lives, particularly those women living in shelters who, in her opinion, were in fact satisfied with their situation and eagerly used the means offered to them, failing to change anything about themselves or to learn from their own mistakes; she referred to them as "cheeky claimants". Her views were based on several years of watching the lives of various women there. She did not accept such people's attitude. She did not want to be like them and be content with the received support. She believed that the system was not strict enough and that it does not make people improve themselves. Thus she arrived at an idea to apply repressive methods, because the methods used so far failed to mobilize many people's effort.

The problem that "Dominika" raised was very important, but I objected to her idea, since I in turn could see how rigorously such institutions operated at the level of their *hidden curriculum*. This rigorous approach concerns the dimension of symbolic violence rather than physical repression. It is primarily based on creating a sense of shame and guilt in aid beneficiaries. These attitudes are confused with taking responsibility for themselves as expected by the *mainstream* of society and its idea of what it means to be responsible and independent. The employees of the studied facilities become fully dependent on this approach, rather than use any alternative solution. They work under a system which, in the name of eliminating the problem, breaks it down into sub-categories, i.e. it selects and segregates those in need into different varieties in order to better adapt aid measures. In addition, the aid work is subject to parameterization, which favors secondary victimization and division of the poor into 'better' and 'worse' groups. This system has not kept pace with the changing economic, social or mental reality, but it reflects low levels of trust and social solidarity.

My reflection was influenced by the following questions that "Dominika" asked: How does the rest of society deal with the excluded? Is it ready to include them? Or is it able to adapt itself? However, I have declined "Dominika's" viewpoint on the system improvement. What she points out as the cause for ineffectiveness is, in my opinion, the reason for advancing the idea of system support, not only in terms of statutory provisions, as legal acts merely reflect a more general attitude of society.