Buying Food for a Hungry Person in Poland: A Case of an Internet Discussion

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Abstract
The goal of this paper is to investigate the communication emotions used by internet users when facing a situation in which a needy person asks for food; and, as well as to explore socio-emotional discourse practices for constructing a cultural image of a giver and a receiver of help. The results are discussed in light of Arlie Russel Hochschild’s concept of the emotion management and feeling rules and Candance Clark’s concept of sympathy margin.

Key words: beggars, undernourishment, attitudes, emotions, social media, discourse, Poland

INTRODUCTION

In all times and societies there have always been very different and ambivalent attitudes towards the poor (Geremek 1989, 1994, Bauman 1998, Lepianka 2000, Stanaszek 2007, Tarkowska 2013, Shildrick, Rucell J. 2015). The poor have been both admired and condemned. A prominent Polish historian and politician Bronisław Geremek (1989, first published in 1978) wrote in his book Mercy and the Gallows: Europe and the poor from the Middle Ages to the present day about the complexity of the feelings of mercy, noticing that along with humanitarian motives of charity, there is also a motive of affirmation of the giver’s wealth and seeking public recognition of his or her prestige. Nowadays, the view of beggars on the street also provokes different emotions and reactions on the part of passers-by. The emotions of those who give help can also be ambivalent. The question is how emotions shape and are shaped by cultural norms with regards to helping the poor?
This paper has the following structure. To begin with, I shortly present a broader context for Poland regarding undernourishment and institutional help. Then, I demonstrate the attitudes of Poles towards beggars and their willingness to help. After that, I explain the subject of my research and draw a theoretical and methodological framework. Finally, the results of the analysis and discussion are presented.

1. POVERTY AND UNDERNOURISHMENT IN POLAND AND INSTITUTIONAL FOOD ASSISTANT PROGRAMS

In 1989-1991, at the beginning of the systemic transition in Poland, subsidies for food were abolished and food prices increased six times (Gulbicka 2007: 28). The rise in unemployment and the drop of the real incomes of Poles worsened the situation of the poorest, also in meeting their nutrition needs. Jacek Kuron, who was Minister of Labour and Social Policy and an opposition activist in the communist period, took the first social initiative by giving out pea soup to the unemployed and the poor in Warsaw. In 1993, a small state food program for children at schools was started. In the following years, the food program had been gradually expanded. According to the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy (2014), in 2013 about 2 million people were users of a state program for the nutrition of children and adults, including 320 thousand children up to the age of 7, almost 700 thousand pupils of upper-secondary schools; and more than 870 million zlotys were spent. However, according to the data of the research, the state support is not very efficient (Malec, Smyk, Tyrowicz 2015), not all needy pupils receive a valuable dish once a day. Today in Poland, there are several NGOs which operate with food and nutrition assistance programs for the needy: Caritas Polska (“The Peace of Bread” program), The Polish Humanitarian Action (“The Wooden Puppet” program), the Federation of Polish Food Banks. Since 2004, Poland has been participating in the food European Program of Aid to the Poorest (PAED).

Despite institutional help for those who need food assistance, there are people who ask passers-by for money or food. According to the Code of Offences (Kodeks wykroczeń), begging in public places is not allowed for those who have means of livelihood or is able to work. It is assumed that a single return for support in an emergency is not begging. If someone is begging in an importunate way and is cheating, he or she can be punished by being arrested or by being given a fine a reprimand. It is difficult to assess the scale of begging in the streets of Poland. According to police estimations (Zebraczy biznes), there are 200 thousand beggars, of which a half are a kind of professional beggars. Beggars in Poland are mainly Poles, though there are also other groups: Roma and people from the former Soviet republics. There are many types of
beggars, as there are different reasons of begging (e.g. Król 2008). The majority of beggars asks people for money, while some of them ask for food or money for food. Begging for food is an indicator that a person is hungry, and in certain situations it can also be an indicator that a person is poor and worth of compassion and help.

Ordinary people in Poland engage in helping the poor in various ways. The motivations of such behavior can be humanitarian or religious. Religion has an important role in life of many Poles, so the religious motivation in helping those in the greatest need is worth mentioning. The Bible teaches Christians to take responsibility for the poor. It is believed that a person sharing his or her food with the poor will be blessed. Food has a special value as a charity gift at Christmas time (especially at Christmas Eve), and during the Lent. Then people more eagerly share with food while doing daily shopping and donating food to charity organizations. In many Polish cities charity meals (e.g. Christmas Eve suppers, Easter breakfasts) for homeless and other poor people are organized by the church, authorities and other organizations. This happens in accordance to the Christian tradition of fasting, which is connected to prayer, fasting and giving alms to the poor. Almsgiving is a sign of faith, love for God and fellow creature.

2. ATTITUDES OF POLES TOWARDS THE POOR AND BEGGARS

The attitudes towards the poor and charity have been changed across time and societies (Geremek 1994). In the Middle Ages in Europe, beggars were an integral part of society. They played their role according to Christian doctrine. Poverty had a spiritual meaning, and according to the Old Testament, the poor should be shown compassion. Churches and monasteries supported those in need by dispensing food, clothing, shelter and money.

Increasing poverty in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries due to food crisis, and demographic and economic expansion changed the attitudes to the poor by the public and authorities. Begging started to be stigmatized and punished. In industrial societies ability to work became crucial in separating the “deserving” (incapable to work) poor from the “undeserving” (who did not want to work).

Later on, images linking poverty with social pathology (e.g. alcoholism, criminal behaviour) appeared. The poor were seen by society as redundant (Czarnowski 1956). They also were seen as “insubordinate”, because they dared to “consider that the dinners given out to them are due to them and they expressed dissatisfaction with the poor quality of the distributed groceries” (Czarnowski 2006 [1956]: 96, in translation of Mendel 2011: 163). Such negative images of the poor influenced charitable attitudes of people as being more disciplinary. In modern consumer society, it is consumption, not production that became a source of new social
division, so the poor became unwanted (Bauman 1998). In contemporary affluent societies, being poor became even a more shameful experience than in early traditional societies.

In modern times, almsgiving was replaced by social welfare policies. According to Richard Titmuss (1974), there are different models of social policy: residual welfare, industrial performance and institutional redistribution. Residual welfare is based on the premises that the private market and the family are the main channels of meeting the individual’s needs. Social welfare institutions have a limited role in helping those most in need. The industrial achievement-performance model is based on work performance and productivity. It assumes that people should work to meet their own needs. The institutional redistributive model “sees social welfare as a major integrated institution in society, providing universalist services outside the market on the principle of need. It is in part based on theories about the multiple effects of social change and the economic system, and in part on the principle of social equality. It is basically a model incorporating systems of redistribution in command-over-resources-through-time” (Titmuss 1974: 146). Thus, it can be assumed that people believe in various models of social policy, which influence their attitudes to the poor.

Public opinion in Poland did not know too much about poverty during the communist period, because poverty was a taboo as a research topic and as a theme to be discussed in public discourse. From the beginning of the transition in 1990’s, the awareness of the problem of poverty became noticed and recognized; and, as a result, various research and public discussions appeared. Nowadays Polish public opinion overestimates the scale of poverty, and explains the reasons of poverty in rather individualistic than structural terms (CBOS 2012). In general, more than half of the respondents consider the poor as intelligent, kind and honest. However, the higher a person’s status, the more negative attitude towards the poor (Marchlewska 2014).

Attitudes towards beggars are even more unfavorable. However, it should be said that the attitudes of Poles changed during the time of transition (Krajewski 2008: 11). While in 1990’s there was a deep economic crisis and there were many unemployed people, the attitudes of Poles to beggars were more sympathetic. However, later, when dishonest and more aggressive beggars appeared on the streets, the attitudes of people became more unfavorable. The pioneering qualitative sociological research of beggars in Poland (Bukowski, Marmuszewski 1995) revealed that passers-by mostly show uncharitable attitudes towards the beggars (“passing”, “bypassing”, “curiosity”, “disapproval”), they seldom engage in some kind of help for beggars. Another study into the attitude of 100 passers-by towards beggars conducted in 2001 in Poznan (Król 2008) demonstrated that 92% of the respondents had an indifferent attitude towards beggars in a situation when beggars did not disturb them and were not aggressive and not bothersome. Only
8% of the respondents declared that they would give alms to a beggar. According to a public opinion poll (CBOS 2000), 9% of Poles give alms very often, 36% give alms seldom, 31% never gives money to beggars, 24% give alms very rarely and only in unusual situations. Some people can believe in the institutional redistribution model of social welfare (Titmuss 1974), and hence not giving charity on the street.

People have various motivations in helping the poor. Some of them refer to Christian motives, others to humanitarian ones. Some of them occasionally give alms and sometimes support institutional charity programs, while others work as volunteers in charitable organizations or support those organizations in the longer run. There are also people who do not want to take responsibility for strangers, so they ignore beggars on the street, and even can feel fear. All in all, it can be assumed that knowledge on poverty and social welfare models influence people’s charitable attitudes.

The presented data on attitudes to beggars can be perceived in a more critical way, while people’s answers to interview questions may not be completely truthful. Elżbieta Tarkowska (2013: 53) wrote that in Poland there are a lot of statistical research on poverty and there are not so many qualitative ones, especially in the sphere of social and relational aspects of poverty, interactions with the poor, attitudes and emotions. Therefore, qualitative analysis of helping relation between a giver and a receiver of help can have important value in revealing people’s attitudes toward the beggars.

3. THEORY AND METHODS

The theoretical framework of the study is built on the sociology of emotions, namely Arlie Russel Hochschild’s concept of the emotion management and feeling rules, and Candance Clark’s concept of the sympathy margin. In regard to internet discussion, it is useful to take on some parts of Hochschild’s theory. First, sharing difficult emotions online can be analyzed in terms of cognitive emotional work. According to Hochschild, there are various types of cognitive emotional work, based on the recodification of a situation. The author states that:

As in an initial, more automatic codification of a situation, deliberate recodification means asking oneself (a) What category in my classification schema of situations fits this new situation? (the schema may include blame-in situations, blame-out situations, credit-in situations, credit-out situations, etc.), and (b) What category in my classification schema of emotions fits the emotion I’m feeling right now? (i.e., is it anger, general anxiety, disappointment?)” (Hochschild 1979, 562).

Meeting a beggar in a city who asks us to help violates our anonymous status in public place due to appraisals of our reaction by other passers-by (Marmuszewski, Światłowski 1995). In this interaction both a beggar and a passer-by play a difficult game using various tools to protect
their identity, to achieve goals, to maintain the social status and emotional well-being. People can feel discomfort with regards to themselves. Both giving a hand to a beggar and refusing to help him or her refer to emotional work, including a cognitive one. This emotional work is carried out in accordance to the socio-cultural and emotional rules and ideologies. Beggars cannot be helped by all people and in every situation.

Candance Clark (1987) states that sympathy is an emotion guided by complicated social norms, by cultural “feeling rules” and by the structure of relationships between sympathizer and the one offering sympathy. Sympathy is not experienced by all those in finding themselves in trouble/difficult situations. Those who receive it can face different ways of expressing sympathy. It can be sincere sympathy or it can be feigned sympathy. As she put it:

a potential sympathizer considers the moral worth of the other, the sympathy worthiness of the other’s plight, the other’s complicity in the plight, and one's own situation relative to the other’s. The outcome may or may not be sympathy (Clark 1987, 297).

Clark claims that showing sympathy can mean caring or be a manifestation of human connection, but also it can be a sign of the superiority or moral worth of the donor. The author states that people have different sympathy margins and so they react to meeting beggars in different ways. Some beggars can receive more sympathy than others. It depends on various factors:

sympathy margins are affected by one's sympathy biography – previous adherence to the protocols or etiquette for owing, giving, claiming, and accepting sympathy per se (ibidem, 303).

It is expected that the gift of sympathy should be reciprocated. Clark writes:

Rules for repaying sympathy with sympathy, like those for paying gratitude, are contingent on power relations. For example, repaying a superior with sympathy (an equal return) may be considered an insult; gratitude is often preferred (ibidem, 313).

The methodological inspiration for my research comes from the works of Michele Foucault. The crucial topics of Foucault’s discourse theory were relations of power and knowledge in a historical perspective. He wrote: “each discourse contains the power to say something other than what is actually says, and thus to embrace a plurality of meanings…” (Foucault 1972, 118). For Foucault “to analyze discourse is to hide and reveal contradictions” (Foucault 1972, 151). According to him, discourse analysis has been seen as multifunctional related to “constituting social identities and social relations.” Another inspiration was methodology of qualitative research case. “Qualitative researchers have strong expectations that the reality perceived by people inside and outside the case will be social, cultural, situational, and
contextual – and they want the interactivity of functions and contexts as well described as possible” (Stake 2005, 452).

My case study discourse is a way of constructing knowledge about emotions and attitudes towards beggars and the poor, about charity, and also about defining oneself and coping with difficult emotions. It is obvious, that a charitable act generates power relations between a giver and a receiver of help. I am interested in revealing the complexity of that experience in the analyzed example. I also agree that “the utility of case research to practitioners and policy makers is in its extension of experience. The methods of qualitative case study are largely the methods of disciplining personal and particularized experience” (Stake 2005, 460).

4. A CASE STUDY OF AN INTERNET DISCUSSION

Although the emotional experience at the beginning has as an individual and private character, it can later on be shared with other people (Rimé 2009). It is estimated that people independent of age and gender share emotions with others in more than 80% of all emotional situations (Rimé 2009). Although both positive and negative emotions can be socially shared, these are negative emotions, which fuel cognitive work. Modern Western culture allows people to share with their emotions in social media. As Zygmunt Bauman (2012) expressed it:

We live in a confessional society, promoting public self-exposure to the rank of the prime and easiest available, as well as arguably the most potent and the sole truth proficient, proof of social existent. Millions of Facebook users vie with each other to disclose and put on public record the most intimate and otherwise inaccessible aspects of their identity, social connections, thoughts, feelings and activities.

In light of this statement, it is possible and inspiring to look at the expressed opinions and communication emotions of Facebook users. The present case study examines the attitudes of people towards helping beggars who ask passers-by on the street for food or money to buy food. It is based on 500 of 5058 selected Facebook comments (200 first and 300 last comments) to Tomasz Motylnski’s post (who is an IT worker, rather unknown for the public, a representative of the middle class). The selection of comments was made based on the following procedures: reading comments many times, concentrating on early, as more spontaneous reactions, and late, as partly being influenced with reactions of other people. This is an interesting case, because it attracted a lot of people (including the media) in a short period of time opening a big discussion on the moral condition of Polish society. When Tomasz Motylnski published a private Facebook post about his experience of buying food for a poor man on July 2014, 170 thousand Facebook users liked his post, and 1.5 million people visited his Facebook page. He also gave several interviews in the mass media, including television.
This case was selected after searching the Internet for other examples to conclude that it is a unique discourse on poverty not typical for the Polish media. The selected Facebook post was presented by a man, not a woman, which contradicts to the assumptions of Arlie R. Hochschild's concept about gender ideologies and emotional work. She states that emotional work has more importance for women than men. However, in the case of helping relation with the poor, this man also manages his difficult emotions. In its turn, Candance Clark argues that compassion of men has higher value for the general public in Western societies than the compassion of women. Maybe this partly explains the great interest of people and their social reactions to this case. However, there is a need to add some more reasons of public interest to the case. The first reason was attaching a receipt for food Motylinski bought for the needy man. Some people assessed this behavior as bragging about a good deed. The second reason was the author's declaration that he helped the poor man despite the fact that he is an atheist. Therefore, there were many various reactions, including the attitudes to the author of the post and his help, the attitudes towards the needy man and to other beggars on the streets, the attitudes to help and its effectiveness. Robert E. Stake advises the researcher to choose the case from which we can learn the most. “That may mean taking the one most accessible or the one we can spend the most time with. Potential for learning is a different and sometimes superior criterion to representativeness. Sometimes it is better to learn a lot from an atypical case than a little from a seemingly typical case” (Stake 2005: 451). It seems to me that the chosen case meets these criteria.

It is obvious that such an analysis of internet opinions is not representative of Poles in general. Yet it has an important value in the cultural perspective. It can reveal different practices of discourse of the part of Polish society, which actively presents its ideas and expresses emotions publicly about help the poor. The research topic is a specific one and it seems that in this case, people’s opinions are rather sincere (especially the first spontaneous reactions and reactions using people's own similar or different experiences in their contacts with beggars on the streets), though there is no possibility to check the authenticity of the analyzed material (posts of the internet users). The analysis has unobtrusive character and this is the important strength of the adopted methodology.

The following research questions have been formulated: What are the ways of giving help and compassion? How do they refer to emotion work? Who is given sympathy and compassion, and in which circumstances? What emotions arise when coming into contact with a beggar on the street and how they are managed? The aim of the research is to reveal the dynamics of the
construction of self (giver) and other (receiver). That is why such emotions as pride and shame are given a special interest.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. SYMPATHY MARGINS

The element of deservingness already appeared in Motylinski’s initial story. As the author wrote in his post about an old working poor man asking him for 10 groszes to buy bread: “He looked neat, there was no smell of alcohol, so he got 2 zlotes”. Here we can see verification of a beggar and process of taking a decision in which the appearance is a crucial criterion. The author of the post recognized the poor as someone who needs help and who can be given sympathy. He recodifies the situation as blame-out, credit-in. Other commentators of the post were mentioning that aid should be given to old people, to the sick and to the people with disabilities. Young beggars were stigmatized, recognized as those who cannot deserve help. There was an opinion that aid is for “our people,” and not for foreigners.

The Facebook users commenting on the post shared their own experiences. There were two different situations discussed: 1) when someone bought food for a beggar and was met with a grateful reaction from the receiver, and 2) when reaction was ungrateful. In the first case, expressing exaggerated gratitude was stressed. It was linked to those beggars who wanted food. In the second case, there were the reactions of the beggars wanted only money, not food, and they were very unpleasant and disappointing cases for the commentators. The ungrateful reactions were different: one beggar threw the shopping food in the trash, another one tried to resell the food, someone called a person names, declaring willingness to buy food instead of giving money. The first type of experience happened to the author of the post. The important motive for sympathy and emotional reaction was the grateful reaction of the recipient. It is probably that in the future, those who experienced the first situation will help those who beg for food. On the contrary, those people who faced with the second situation will probably refuse to help. Their sympathy credit was not being paid.

People who help the poor admitted that sometimes they were in difficult situations themselves. Such an explanation corresponds with statements made by social psychologists that people more willingly help to others who are similar to them (Aronson et al. 2007).
5.2. MANAGING DIFFICULT EMOTIONS

Let us come back to the Motylinski’s post which describes the behavior of the receiver of help. A beggar chose the cheapest food products, asking if he can take something for sure. When shopping was finished, Motylinski was deeply moved and felt very bad. As he described in his post, several minutes passed while he could not cope with his emotions in this situation. He admitted that he was crying in his car. Similar emotional reactions including crying were presented by the other post’s commentators (both men and women). In this case crying can be interpreted as a way of relieving the emotional tension, as well as an expression of helplessness.

Following the idea of a confessional society, the first reaction to Motylinski’s Facebook post were his words: “This post was only my expression of emotions which I wanted to throw away because yesterday I couldn’t manage them.” It is also in line with Hochschild’s cognitive emotion work in a situation of an interaction with a beggar.

Paradoxically, even the commitment to help the needy leads to discomfort and does not brings full satisfaction. This is in line with the concept of existential gilt (Montada, Schmitt, Dalbert 1986). People experiencing the first situation (with a grateful reaction of the receiver) declared their sadness and disappointment. As one of the commentators (Daniel Sxoxk), who bought a begging woman with a child some groceries, wrote: “in fact, it doesn’t improve my mood.” Although the woman “terribly thanked” to him, he was aware of the fact that his help was accidental, and he didn’t know how to help her in the longer perspective.

5.3. MANAGING THE ROLE OF A GIVER

A beggar asking us for food in public places enforces our reaction, which influences our self-image, including the looking-glass self, defined by Charles Horton Cooley (1902) as how we think others perceive us. In the situations discussed by the Facebook commentators of Motylinski’s post there were mainly negative reactions of the public mentioned: a feeling of alienation, a lack of understanding in the other’s eyes. The following expressions of the online comments illustrate it:

“People looked at me as if I was a leper”, wrote Iwona Anowi, who gave 5 zlotys to a poor man and talked to him for an half an hour. It was in front of the discount store Biedronka. She also mentioned that the situation happened “before Christmas.” It shows us an additional Christian motive to help the poor.

“People standing in line looked at me as if I was an alien at least.” In this way Mariusz Pawlak describes his experience, when a homeless asked him whether he can eat the rest of the food left on his plate; he bought a new dish for him.
The abovementioned situations can tell us about a social norm of refusing to help a beggar. So, those who break the norm are punished by such an exclusive perception. One of the commentators mentioned that not only in Poland do people look strangely at those who help beggars in public places. A similar situation was also observed in London. Therefore, it is a question whether the norm for refusing to help beggars in the street by ordinary people is universal in modern Western culture?

When managing their role of a giver, people refer to humanitarian or religious motivations. Motives for helping the needy and faith have been discussed very emotionally. Motylinski ended his post with the words that he helped the poor despite the fact that he is an atheist. The majority of comments supported the opinion that atheists understand more quickly the need to help, and that the representatives of the Catholic Church are very often not helpful. There were contrary opinions that there are believers who help the poor. Actually, for Poland, according the public opinions poll (CBOS 2016), these are believers who are more often involved in charitable activity. This piece of discussion shows us that one of the emotional dimensions of charity in the case of Polish society refers to religious values.

Another dimension refers to patriotic values. Both Motylinski and some disputants mentioned their shame, because politicians and the state have not solved the problem of people suffering from difficult situations and undernourishment. Such a way of thinking corresponds to the wider public opinion in Poland that considers helping the poor as mostly an obligation of local authorities and government (CBOS 2008).

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to provide a discourse analysis of helping relation between a food beggar and a potential food giver in terms of emotions and attitudes being expressed and communicated online. It was revealed that sympathy was not equally shown to all beggars, what is in line with Candace Clark’s theory. There were several reasons influencing opinions, feelings and behavior towards food beggars. First, the criterion of the deservingness of the needy was crucial for the internet discussants. As a large amount of research on poverty shows the same criterion is also discussed in public discourse in regard to other people living in poverty. Second, the previous experience was taken into account, in which a beggar’s grateful reaction was important.

Asking someone to buy something to eat creates an interaction order with various emotions and unequal power relations. On the one hand, people providing aid feel proud, because of their sympathy (becoming a sympathy donor towards a poor person), on the other
hand, they feel sorrow (sadness and disappointment) that their help is just momentary and they are not improving the status of a needy person.

Summing up, the Samaritan way of conduct towards a hungry poor person gives rise to two basic emotions in the observers: some feel compassion and few of them help the beggar, others are hostile and they stigmatize both a poor person and his or her virtue. Further research is needed to explore attitudes towards of helping the needy in different cultural contexts aiming to reveal the universal and culturally determined emotional reactions in interaction between a beggar and a giver.

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