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## **Stereotypes and prejudices towards mentally ill**

In many countries around the world including Poland, mentally ill person is perceived through the prism of inflexible, stiff stereotypes and prejudices, which create a lot of difficulties in social functioning. The research shows the widespread lack of knowledge about mental illness and the behavior of mentally ill people and that it is very often replaced by misleading, simplistic and untrue stereotypes.

### **Stereotypes and prejudices - theoretical introduction**

The term 'stereotype' is used in professional literature for one hundred years. During this time its meaning was frequently modified. In common language word 'stereotype' means simplification of perception of some objects or people, which is impossible to verify in reality. 'Stereotype' is defined as a perception structure that embraces the knowledge, conviction and anticipation held by members of various society groups.<sup>1</sup> In psychological literature the researchers very often deal with the stereotype problems in anticipation context. Stereotypes touching various society groups seem to be a part of national heritage. They are passed from generation to generation as an element of the knowledge gathered by the society. Because of deep inveteracy of stereotypes in culture of each group we acquire them during the process of learning since early childhood. Stereotypes are characterized mainly by a set of features of the object. Chlewiński<sup>2</sup> proposes defining stereotype by distinguishing few features:

- 1) cognitive character of stereotype – lack of content, minimal differentiation, simplification
- 2) emotional coloring – intensive emotions, mainly negative
- 3) generalization – unqualified generalization, conviction about complete similarity of representatives of some group

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<sup>1</sup> Macrae C.N., Stangor Ch., Hewstone M., *Stereotypy i uprzedzenia. Najnowsze ujęcie*, Gdańsk 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Chlewiński Z., *Stereotypy: struktura, funkcje, geneza. Analiza interdyscyplinarna*. [w:] Z. Chlewiński, I. Kurcz (red.). *Stereotypy i uprzedzenia*. Warszawa 1992, s.11-12.

4) permanence – information that is incompatible with the stereotype itself is rejected while it would be pretty easy to confirm it; stereotypes are formed and passed over in early social education

5) cohesion – stereotypes have tendency to combine

6) social character – stereotypes are formed and held inside the group

7) verbal character – some claims that non-verbal stereotypes do not exist

8) subjective certainty – conviction about accuracy of opinions expressed in stereotypes

Review of contemporary literature pertaining to stereotypes indicates different ways and attitudes in their description. One of the ways appeals to contrast between description and valuation (descriptive approach – evaluative approach) while the second to contrast between a unit and a group (individual approach – group approach). In the descriptive concept stereotype characterizes a social group of some kind, associated in the semantic memory with the name of the category<sup>3</sup>. Representatives of this conception<sup>4</sup> claim that the name of the category automatically releases the content of the representation. Polish psychologists, who apprehend stereotype as a particular category of perceptive pattern, hold similar attitude.<sup>5</sup> Evaluative approach states that stereotypes beside content properties contain judgments referring to persons who are represented in the category.<sup>6</sup> Not all researches tend to agree with this opinion.

In understanding stereotypes the individual approach deserves a special notice.<sup>7</sup> Stereotype is treated as a dynamically changing scheme due to the individual personal experience during encounter with members of various groups. Conviction of stereotype as a collective knowledge shared among the members of the community is typical for the cultural approach. Many psychologist do not agree with the statement that social stereotype is necessarily shared by community. Some research presented in scientific literature shows clearly that there is a supra-cultural phenomenon of unanimity stereotypes. In the traditional approach stereotypes are convictions about people belonging to different groups, usually negative, false and change-resistant, based rather with on emotions than rational thinking and common in a

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<sup>3</sup> Stangor C., Lange J.E., *Mental representation of social groups: Advanced in understanding stereotypes and stereotyping* [w:] M. P. Zanna (red.), *Advances in experimental social psychology*, San Diego 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Fiske S. T., Taylor S. E., *Social Cognition*, New York 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Kurcz I., *Zmienność i nieuchronność stereotypów. Studium na temat roli stereotypów w reprezentacji umysłowej świata społecznego*, Warszawa 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Dovidio J. F., Gertner S. L., *Prejudice, discrimination and racism: historical trends and contemporary approaches* [w:] J. F. Dovidio, S. L. Gertner (red.), *Prejudice, discrimination and racism*, New York 1986.

<sup>7</sup> Fiske S. T., Taylor S. E., op. cit.

specific culture.<sup>8</sup> Dominating presently in literature, socially-cognitive approach treats stereotypes as conviction held about members of different groups. They can sometimes but not always, be false negative and unchangeable and are not necessarily shared by other people.<sup>9</sup> Weigl<sup>10</sup> claims that stereotypes help achieving the subjective conviction about the increase of cognitive control over the social surroundings. Creation of stereotypes can be preceded with prejudice that is judgmental attitude towards members of some social group. It is stated that stereotype content can become a base for the prejudice. The relationship between stereotypes and prejudices is complex and the statement that stereotypes lead to the prejudices would be a huge simplification. Stereotypes contribute to creating prejudices but prejudices also take part in creating stereotypes.<sup>11</sup> In literature prejudice is defined as negative attitudes. Prejudice in English can be translated as 'pre' - before and 'judice' - judgment.<sup>12</sup> It is a generalization, premature judgment, superstition held about a group or category of people.<sup>13</sup> Weigl<sup>14</sup> claims that social prejudice is a priori aversion for others only because they belong to a specific social group. This aversion is a generalized premise reaction for this group and their representatives. Chlewiński<sup>15</sup> after reviewing literature pointed out that prejudice is:

- 1) a set of stereotypes
- 2) based on premises conflicting with reality
- 3) a 'pre-judgment'
- 4) attitude with dominative emotional negative component
- 5) excessive simplification and generalization
- 6) motivating action, stimulating verbal as well as physical aggression and discrimination

Stereotypes and prejudices are similar conceptions but they are not the same. In stereotypes cognitive component is dominating and in prejudice - behavioral. Essential element of prejudice is emotional component while in the stereotype it's not so important.

### **Stereotypes and prejudices towards mentally ill people**

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<sup>8</sup> Weigl B., *Stereotypy i uprzedzenia*, [w:] J. Strelau (red.), *Psychologia*, T. 3, Gdańsk 2002, s. 205-224.

<sup>9</sup> Macrae C. N., Stangor Ch., Hewstone M., op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> Weigl B., op. cit., s. 205-224.

<sup>11</sup> Macrae C.N., Stangor Ch., Hewstone M., op. cit..

<sup>12</sup> Jarymowicz M., *W poszukiwaniu przesłanek sztywności stereotypów*, [w:] M. Kofta, A. Jasińska-Kania (red.), *Stereotypy i uprzedzenia. Uwarunkowania psychologiczne i kulturowe*, Warszawa 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Goodman N., *Wstęp do socjologii*, Poznań 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Weigl B., op. cit., s. 214.

<sup>15</sup> Chlewiński Z., op. cit., s.13-14.

Mentally ill people in all historical eras and in all cultures have been stigmatized. Review of modern empirical research proves that mental illness is still the strongest stigmatizing factor in the society.<sup>16</sup> Among mentally ill people the most stigmatized are schizophrenic patients. It is expressed for example by the simple fact that many professionals (psychologists, psychiatrists) not mentioning the society use the term '*schizophrenic*' with negative meaning and it should refer to person afflicted with schizophrenia. Using the traditional stereotypes people tend to use pejorative vocabulary, depreciating mentally ill people and creating the atmosphere of danger and distance. Many years ago Goffman<sup>17</sup> wrote about consequences of such action. He also stated that fact of using terms '*schizophrenia*' or '*schizophrenic*' in non-medical context seems to be highly illogical. The worst is the fact that this verbal abuse is often executed by people who hold important public functions.<sup>18</sup> Statements by politicians, that schizophrenia is a lack of logic only strengthen the negative stereotype of this illness. Stereotypes towards mentally ill refer to convictions about their precariousness, unpredictable behavior, lower intellectual activity, lack of responsibility and impossibility of returning to previously performed social roles. Negative stereotypes result in fact, that mentally ill are being treated like those who are different and have disturbed identity.<sup>19</sup>

Unfriendly social attitude towards person treated psychiatrically can increase possibility of not starting the therapy because of stigma and what comes with it - the uncontrolled worsening of illness. In the past few years there was noticed a tendency towards a more favorable perception. There are still many stereotypes and prejudices which make functioning in society much harder for a disabled person and have an unfavorable impact on their mental health. Analysis of scientific literature and social life shows that problems of mentally ill people are more frequently recognized. There is an increasing number of press and book publications regarding it and media also present variety of problems faced by mentally ill people. They become heroes in movies, press articles and other publications. Unfortunately, very often, negative incidents with participation of mentally ill people are presented as a sensational event. A person with mental disorders is shown in an incompatible way. In many films aggressive behavior is attributed to mental illness, but statistics show that they are less often perpetrators of aggression than people who are mentally healthy. An example in Polish cinematography is '*Tato*' – a movie that was shown a few years ago. Protagonist suffers from

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<sup>16</sup> Świtaj P., *Piętno choroby psychicznej*, „Postępy Psychiatrii i Neurologii” 2005, nr 14(2): 137-144.

<sup>17</sup> Goffman E., *Sigma: notes on the management of spoiled identity*, New Jersey 1963.

<sup>18</sup> Świtaj P., *Piętno choroby psychicznej*, „Postępy Psychiatrii i Neurologii” 2005; 14(2): 137-144.

<sup>19</sup> Goffman E., op. cit.

manic-depressive psychosis. She is shown as a dangerous woman, even to her family, aggressive and even able to commit a bloody murder. Such image of mentally ill person reinforces the stereotype of aggressiveness and unpredictability in society. In social opinion treatment from mental disease, taking psychotropic drugs and staying under permanent psychiatric care is highly stigmatizing. People who judge the mentally ill person usually have no idea that mentally illness is a dynamic process. There are periods when positive symptoms such as delusion and hallucinations sharpen, but also states of remission when person with mental illness function well. Mentally ill are aware of the fact that their psychiatric past is a factor, which causes a distance or even social isolation. There is a certain label of mental disease, which results in a fact that people are often unable to continue their previous job or find a new one. A lot of employers find it a sufficient reason to terminate employment or refuse to hire someone who was treated at a psychiatric hospital. Stereotypes about mental illness are apparent in convictions that mentally ill people differ from those who are sick and have, for example stomach, heart or pancreas problems.

A. Grzywa<sup>20</sup> claims that great efforts are needed to convince patients themselves and their families that mental disease is an illness of the brain the same as an infarct is an illness of heart and diabetes an abnormal function of pancreas. Stereotypes and prejudices are directed not only towards an ill person but also towards their families. Because of the expected negative reaction of others when deciding about a psychiatric treatment this fact is often kept in high secret. The fear of social stigma of mentally ill prevents the sharing of information about the sickness even with family and friends. Analysis of the articles published in 2002 in five Polish magazines made by K. Borysewicz<sup>21</sup> proved that there is a large divergence between declared attitudes towards people with schizophrenia and the portrayals in media. People afflicted with schizophrenia are often shown as highly dangerous. The connection between mentally ill person and cruel murders is a topic often portrayed in media. The research carried out by B. Wciórka and J. Wciórka<sup>22</sup> shows that Polish society doesn't have a bad attitude but is rather helpless towards their problems. Helplessness is caused by the lack of knowledge that is replaced with simplistic stereotypes. Social education is here essential in order to help draw a real picture of mentally ill, their place and part in other people lives. Analysis of empirical research presented in literature shows that the best combination in

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<sup>20</sup> Grzywa A., *Stygmatyzacja chorobą psychiczną*, [ @: ] [WWW.zdrowie.dla.was.pl](http://WWW.zdrowie.dla.was.pl), 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Borysewicz K., *Między tolerancją a dyskryminacją – stereotyp schizofrenii w polskich czasopiśmie opiniotwórczych*. „Postępy Psychiatrii i Neurologii” 2003, nr 12(4), s. 403-411.

<sup>22</sup> Wciórka B., Wciórka J., *Polacy wobec chorób psychicznych i osób chorych psychicznie*. Warszawa, 2005.

helping to understand real situation and to fight the stereotypes is simultaneously contact and education.<sup>23</sup> Stereotypes and social prejudices are components of stigmatization. Social stigmatization has an incredible influence on mentally ill especially when it leads to self-stigmatization. Mentally ill people react differently for unfavorable attitude in social contacts. Further research of this subject is required especially their sense of guilt, shame and self-esteem. Weakening of stereotypes and social prejudices and thus minimization of stigmatization of this group requires long-term and wide-range campaigns. Improvement of social and emotional functioning of mentally ill people is possible if the negative stereotypes of these people will be limited.

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<sup>23</sup> Rusch N., Angermeyer M.C., Corrigan P.W., *Mental illness sigma: Concepts, consequences, and initiatives to reduce sigma*. “Europen Psychiatry” 2005, 20, s. 529-539.

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## **Summary**

This article talks about stereotypes and prejudices prevalent in society towards mentally ill people. Present here are the assumptions and theoretical categories of stereotypes and prejudices and their relations. The research shows that mental illness is one of the most powerful socially excluding stigma. One of the examples of social censure mentally ill people is the pejorative vocabulary used to characterize this group of people. Some people are convinced that mentally ill are aggressive, violent and their behaviour is unpredictable, that they are less intelligent and irresponsible. In public opinion contact with psychiatrist or treatment in a mental hospital stigmatizes the person for life. Many people who have mental health problems don't start the treatment because they are afraid of public opinion. The stereotypes and prejudices greatly increase the problems faced by mentally ill people and impede their social functioning. We have to change the negative stereotypes in order to help people with mental disorders and to make their treatment more effective.

## **Stereotypy i uprzedzenia w stosunku do osób psychicznie chorych**

### **Streszczenie**

W pracy scharakteryzowano stereotypy i uprzedzenia wobec osób psychicznie chorych. Przedstawiono podstawowe założenia teoretyczne dotyczące stereotypów i uprzedzeń oraz ich wzajemnych relacji. Badania pokazują, że choroba psychiczna jest jednym z najsilniej wykluczających społecznie stygmatów. Przejawem napiętnowania osób psychicznie chorych jest chociażby pejoratywne słownictwo, deprecjonujące tych ludzi. Stereotypy dotyczące tej grupy osób ujawniają się między innymi w przekonaniu o ich agresywności, nieprzewidywalnym zachowaniu, mniejszych możliwościach intelektualnych, braku odpowiedzialności. W opinii społecznej, kontakt z psychiatrą czy leczenie w szpitalu psychiatrycznym, stają się stygmatyzujące dla osoby. Obawy związane z opinią społeczną powstrzymują wiele osób dotkniętych zaburzeniami psychicznymi przed podjęciem leczenia. Stereotypy i uprzedzenia w dużym stopniu przyczyniają się do nasilenia trudności w społecznym funkcjonowaniu osób psychicznie chorych. Zmiana stereotypów i uprzedzeń jest niezbędnym warunkiem dla skutecznego leczenia i pomocy osobom chorym.