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Stigma on the Homeless in the USA and Hungary: An Essay on the Interplay of Prejudice with the Sociocultural Environment

Essay

Homelessness is an increasingly severe problem in many countries around the world. The homeless are often stigmatized by the rest of society. This essay explores how several contextual factors can moderate the expression of prejudice towards the homeless in two countries with different backgrounds, Hungary and the USA. Ambivalent opinions of the homeless exist in both societies, and prejudice is present to some extent in both, but especially in Hungary. Differences and similarities in public attitudes are related to specific challenges of a Western capitalist system, present in both countries, and of the legacy of Communism, unique to Hungary. Psychological mechanisms and cultural values also influence prejudice, such as the perception of threat towards the ingroup, a need for stability, individualism and belief in a just world. It is hoped that this essay can contribute to a complex and dynamic understanding of prejudice.

Keywords: Homelessness, Prejudice, Discrimination, USA, Hungary

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INTRODUCTION

Lying on a bench or on a doorstep, dressed in shredded clothes, with filthy hair and worn-out shoes. Carrying big plastic bags, or sitting on the street with a paper cup for small change. A host of associations are evoked by that one word: "homeless". Virtually each one of us has some picture in their mind when thinking of homeless people, which makes them an established social category. There is a sad reason for this: the homeless have been present in society for a very long time, and they are for many of us a fact of everyday life. Still, despite their visibility, they are in some ways the most invisible group of all; invisible because most of us have never had a real conversation with a homeless person, and because, at any moment, those we see on the street are only a small part of all the homeless. Most are in a shelter, standing in line for food, or a variety of other places. Knowing so little about them, how accurate is the image that we spontaneously activate when thinking about the homeless? If our image of them is biased, what are the consequences for the homeless themselves? How come we develop negative views of them, and why is this more common in some places than in others? In this essay, I will attempt to answer these questions.

Homelessness: An overview

Homelessness has no universally recognized definition. The homeless are very diverse, and some definitions are broader than others, both in terms of which situation a person should be in to be considered homeless (e.g. living on the street, in temporary accommodation, or inadequate housing) and for how long this situation should last. Definitions depend on the country (e.g. Tipple & Speak, 2005), but also on the different purposes of the persons using the definition; for example, advocacy groups for the homeless, policymakers, and researchers (Toro, 2007).

For example, The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act defines a homeless person as someone lacking a fixed place to sleep, or living in a supervised institution designed for temporary accommodation, or a place not normally used by humans for sleeping (as cited in Dail, 2000). The European ETHOS definition adds persons that could lose their housing at any moment, and those living in substandard or overcrowded housing (as cited in Hladikova & Hradecky, 2007). Tipple and Speak (2005) point out that a real "home" includes not just shelter, but many other things such as security and social connection; thus many people might have a shelter but not a home.

It is estimated that worldwide, about 1 billion people lack adequate housing, of which 100 million are homeless (Capdevila, 2005; Tipple & Speak, 2005). In Europe, there are more than 4 million homeless a year (Minnery & Greenhalgh, 2007). In the USA, the broadest estimate is 3.5 million (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2013).

The homeless show many similarities with the non-homeless poor, and can thus be seen as a subpopulation of the poor (Philippot, Lecocq, Sempoux, Nachtergael, & Galand, 2007). In developed countries, the homeless have many common characteristics, such as overrepresentation of males, people suffering from mental illness and drug abuse, and ethnic minorities and discriminated groups (Toro, 2007). Many suffer social isolation (Zufferey & Kerr, 2004). Youth, women and families as distinct subgroups of homeless appeared only recently and especially in the USA (Toro, 2007; Shinn, 2007).

Less than 1% of the homeless have chosen to live this way (Dail, 2000). There are many reasons to become homeless, which can be individual and structural (Minnery & Greenhalgh, 2007). Some examples of structural causes are high unemployment, lack of cheap housing (Dail, 2000), eviction (Hladikova & Hradecky, 2007), an inadequate welfare system (Shinn, 2007), and discrimination of minorities in areas of housing and employment (Shinn, 2007; Pleace, 2010). Individual problems are both causes and consequences of homelessness, and include, for example, relationship conflicts, mental and physical illness (Dail, 2000; Albert & Dávid, 2001), domestic violence (Dail, 2000), and leaving foster care at 18 (Hodgson, Shelton, Van den Bree, & Los, 2013). Lacking a protective social network is also a prominent cause (Albert & Dávid, 2001).

To address homelessness, every country has its own helping system, often focused on primary assistance such as providing food, clothes and temporary shelter (Philippot et al., 2007). Many authors point out that it would be better to focus on prevention of homelessness and direct provision of housing (e.g. Minnery & Greenhalgh, 2007). Toro (2007) and Shinn (2007) argue that successful countries are those providing generous social welfare and universal healthcare, which prevents creating homelessness in the first place (Toro, 2007; Shinn, 2007).

Prejudice towards the homeless across societies

The homeless are among the most rejected groups of society. Before explaining why this is so, I will first present the concept of prejudice further. Prejudice is defined as "an attitude or orientation towards a group (or its members) that devalues it directly or indirectly, often to the benefit of the self or own group" (Hewstone, Stroebe, & Jonas, 2012, p. 452). Discrimination is

the behavioural expression of this attitude; in Kimmel′s (2011) words, "Discrimination occurs when we treat people who are similar in different ways, or when we treat people who are different in similar ways" (p. 257). When someone is a member of a group that is often discriminated against and considered negatively by most people in society, that person is stigmatized. Goffman (1963) defines stigma as "an attribute of a person that is deeply discrediting, and reduces the person in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (p. 3).

Hewstone et al. (2012) present many theories to explain the phenomenon of prejudice. For example, authoritarianism, characterized by simple thinking and strong adherence to norms, and social dominance orientation, characterized by a preference for hierarchy and justifying of inequality, are both related to prejudice. They are personality traits as well as ideologies. Furthermore, we all have certain cognitive biases that help us to make sense of our complicated social world, and prejudice towards a group can be one way of simplifying one′s worldview. At the intergroup level, we can develop negative attitudes towards an outgroup if it seems to present a threat to our ingroup and its security, interests, resources or shared values. Finally, outgroups may evoke negative emotions such as fear, anger or contempt, that are felt more strongly if they are shared among members of our ingroup.

Different groups evoke different emotions and attract different forms of prejudice. According to the stereotype content model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), the content of prejudice varies along the dimensions of competence (are members of this group efficient at achieving their goals?) and warmth (are they well-intentioned towards my group?). Combining these dimensions results in four different ways of seeing an outgroup, one of which is contemptuous prejudice. This form of prejudice combines low warmth and low competence, and is directed at groups that evoke frustration, anger and disgust, such as the homeless. This category of prejudice is referred to by Fiske et al. (2002) as "pure derogation". They found that out of 25 social groups, the homeless were perceived lowest on both warmth and competence (Fiske et al., 2002).

Why would the homeless be so rejected? Breitner, Győri and Gurály (2002) argue that they evoke fear because they are unknown to us, and walking past them without helping evokes cognitive dissonance, since we like to consider ourselves helpful. This can be resolved either by helping or by blaming the homeless for their own situation, which means they are not worthy of help. Lopez and Ryder (2012) write that they bother us because they are physically unappealing and break norms, publicly performing activities that are normally carried out in private, such as urinating and sleeping. Even though we may know that they

have no choice in the matter, we tend to interpret these behaviours as wrong. We thus blame the victim for their own plight, because we think everyone only gets what they deserve. This belief is called the Belief in a Just World (Lerner & Miller, 1978). People who endorse it think that good actions usually lead to good outcomes and bad actions to bad outcomes, so conversely, someone´s situation is a result of their own doings. If the victim is innocent, their situation is severe and unexplainable, and you cannot help them, as is often the case for the homeless, they are more likely to be blamed (Lerner & Miller, 1978).

Although we are all prone to prejudice to some extent, it is also subject to the norms and values of a particular culture. Norms are shared expectations within a group of what (not) to do, and they can include accepting and expressing prejudice, but may also, alternatively, condemn prejudice and discrimination (Hewstone et al., 2012, p. 239; p. 475). What determines these norms? First, societies differ on how widespread characteristics such as just world beliefs are. For example, Furnham (1985) found that students in an unjust society, South Africa under apartheid, had higher just world beliefs than their British counterparts. Since they were all white and middle-class, he argued that they are socialized to this belief in order to justify their privilege.

Furthermore, societies differ on some cultural dimensions, as proposed by Hofstede (1983), including power distance, individualism, and uncertainty avoidance. Power distance refers to how a society deals with hierarchy: does it accept unequal distribution of power? Uncertainty avoidance refers to how a society deals with ambiguous situations and change (Hofstede, 1983). Individualism refers to the relative importance given to independence of the individual versus connectedness of the group (Crandall, D'Anello, Sakalli, Lazarus, Nejtardt, & Feather, 2001). The dimension of power distance shows theoretical links with prejudice: Furnham (1993) studied just world beliefs in twelve cultures, and found that power distance was related both to just and unjust world beliefs. He hypothesized that in an unequal society, people in high positions believe in a just world and people in low positions in an unjust world. Power distance is also strongly related to social dominance orientation, one of the discussed predictors of prejudice (Ekehammar, Akrami, Gylje, & Zakrisson, 2004). For the dimension of individualism, Crandall et al. (2001) hypothesized that prejudice arises when a person is seen as responsible for a certain attribute that is culturally devalued, but only in individualist societies, where personal responsibility is important (Crandall et al., 2001).

Political factors might play a role: poverty and wealth were explained differently in Western and postcommunist nations in a study by Kreidl (2000). People in postcommunist nations accepted inequality less and related both wealth and poverty to individualistic and

structural causes. People in Western nations more often attributed wealth to individualistic causes (if someone is rich and successful, it is due to their effort, intelligence, etc.). In three countries undergoing political changes, poverty was mainly blamed on the system (Nasser, Abouchedid, & Khashan, 2002). As we have seen when discussing just world beliefs, those who give individualistic explanations of success and failure are likely to blame the victim, and thus to be prejudiced.

Finally, Larsen and Dejgaard (2013) argue that the organization of the social system influences how positively or negatively the poor are depicted in the media, which in turn influences public opinion. In their study, British newspapers contained more negative stories about the poor than Scandinavian newspapers. In the UK, the welfare system is very selective, which sparks debates about who is deserving of welfare and scandals about abuse of benefits; whereas in Scandinavia, everyone is entitled to welfare, so there is no need to ask who is most deserving.

Thus, the society one lives in strongly influences one's attitudes about the poor, other stigmatized groups, and to what extent they are responsible for their own plight. This essay will explore the attitudes of society towards the homeless in the USA and Hungary and compare these two countries to find similarities and differences. I chose to examine the situation of the homeless because, as discussed above, they are a suitable example of a commonly stigmatized group. I chose to compare Hungary and the USA since both have a high occurrence of homelessness compared to most developed countries (Toro et al., 2007; McGah, 2005), but they differ very much in their historical, cultural and political background. I will attempt to explain differences and convergence in the way the homeless are seen in these countries by referring to these contextual differences, as well as to common psychological mechanisms, hoping to encourage, by this example, complex and dynamic understandings of prejudice. In what follows, I will first present some features of American and Hungarian culture, then discuss for both countries separately some background information on the situation of the homeless and the public attitude towards them, followed by a short summary. Finally, a comparison will be attempted, followed by a discussion of limitations, suggestions and a conclusion.

Characteristics of Hungarian and American culture

Hungary and the USA each have their own cultural peculiarities. In a comparison of 50 countries, the USA ranked first on the individualism dimension (Hofstede, 1983). The USA place great emphasis on individual freedom (Phelan, Link, Stueve, & Moore, 1995). Cozzarelli,

Wilkinson and Tagler (2001) called both the Belief in a Just world and the Protestant work ethic "core American values". The term "Protestant work ethic" refers to the idea that everyone has an equal chance of succeeding in life, and can do anything if only they work hard enough (Cozzarelli et al., 2001). Thus, Americans tend to give individualistic explanations of failure (Wright, 1993). Americans are more likely than people in other developed nations to say that people are in control of their own destiny (Kohut, Wike, & Horowitz, 2007). Thus it seems that individual achievement is very important in American society. At the same time, among developed countries, the USA display the highest income inequality (Alvaredo, Atkinson, Piketty, & Saez, 2013) and are the only country without universal healthcare (David, Stremikis, Squires, & Schoen, 2014). This suggests the idea of equal opportunity is illusory, and emphasis on freedom comes at the cost of security. Another peculiarity of American society is the great importance of race: in the USA, questions of race have shaped society, and many issues continue to be framed in terms of race (Philogène, 2004).

What can be said about Hungary? Füri (2005) studied Americans and Hungarians working together and found that Americans give more value to work and achievement, and Hungarians to stability and precision. In a study by Kolman, Noorderhave, Hofstede and Dienes (2003), Hungary scored high on uncertainty avoidance and power distance, and low on individualism, compared to Western countries. The authors described Hungarians as suspicious and defensive. Compared to people from three other Central European countries, Hungarians agreed more with the statement "when people fail in life, it is their own fault". West (1994) describes widespread feelings of insecurity in Hungary shortly after the collapse of communism. In a city bordering Serbia and Romania, security was the residents´ main topic of conversation. They did not trust anyone and were afraid of being robbed or attacked, especially by the many strangers streaming into their city. In a comparison of 11 European countries, Hungarians scored highest on ethnic prejudice (Jagodzinsky & Dobbelaere, 1999). In a survey (Sik, 2007), Hungarians were asked whether they were favourable to immigrants entering the country. The majority (61%) said that it depended on whom, and these were given a list of immigrant groups. For four immigrant groups, 77-87% did not want them in the country. Even more surprisingly, 68% did not want Piresians, a fifth non-existent immigrant group made up by the researchers. Thus, Hungarians seem to be hostile towards strangers. The most rejected minority of Hungary, though, has been in the country for centuries. The Roma, a.k.a. gypsies, suffer deep poverty and systematic discrimination (Kende, 2000).

HUNGARY

Background

I will provide some historical context for the situation of the homeless in Hungary. Until 1989, the country was under Communist rule. When this system collapsed, it left a huge toll on Hungarian society (Udvarhelyi, 2014). The economy broke down, leading to massive poverty and unemployment; housing prices rose dramatically (Oross, 2001; Udvarhelyi, 2014). The homeless appeared suddenly, in big numbers (Dávid & Snijders, 2002). Although homelessness existed under Communism, it was pretended it did not, and the few homeless who existed were labelled "dangerous work-avoiders" and locked up (Breitner et al., 2002). Under Communism, most people were guaranteed a job and housing, and many lived in government-owned workhouses, which mostly closed off or were privatized after the system change (McGah, 2005). Hungarians hoped that the change would make them thrive, but 25 years later, their society is still in crisis (Udvarhelyi, 2014). Today many citizens even feel it was better before (McGah, 2005), because under Communism, despite restrictions of freedom, at least there was security (West, 1994).

In Hungary, the official definition of homelessness is very similar to that of the McKinney Act mentioned above (Albert & Dávid, 2001). The right to housing is not written explicitly in the Constitution, therefore the government has no real responsibility to guarantee it (Bakos, 2008). There are an estimated 8000-20,000 homeless in Budapest, which has a population of two million (Dávid & Snijders, 2002; Breitner et al., 2002; McGah, 2005), and at least 30,000 in the whole country, which has a population of ten million (Breitner et al., 2002; McGah, 2005). The characteristics of Hungary´s homeless are mainly similar to those for developed countries in general; for example, most are men and most are aged 40 to 50 (Breitner et al., 2010). An annual countrywide study of the homeless found no evidence for a higher prevalence of alcoholism. In this study, the homeless turned out to be very busy most of the day, travelling from service to service to get different basic needs met and do administration, standing in line, and generally surviving. Those who had some kind of job worked on average more than 7 hours a day (Breitner et al., 2010). Breitner et al. (2002) explain that even though alcoholism might be as prevalent among the homeless as among other Hungarians, alcoholics are precisely those homeless we see on the street, since alcohol is not permitted in shelters (Breitner et al., 2002).

According to McGah (2005), lack of affordable housing is the main cause of homelessness in Hungary, noting that personal causes for homelessness are mostly the same everywhere, but in countries with a dysfunctional social system such as Hungary, structural causes are added. Help for the homeless is localized rather than centrally organized, and consists of many different services that help the homeless with their basic needs and administration (McGah, 2005; Hajléktalanokért, 2012). Since help only started in the ´90s when homelessness appeared as a large-scale emergency, the focus has merely been on "extinguishing the fire" (Oross, 2001), that is, on superficial help. Bakos (2008) writes that the longer the homeless stay in helping institutions, the less chance they have of getting out of their situation as they are trapped in a cycle of dependency. To be eligible for temporary housing, it is often required to be drug-free, "capable of independent living", and to have an income (Hajléktalanokért, 2012) – impossible criteria for most of the homeless. A new solution called "Housing First" has been tried on a small scale in Budapest, which provides the homeless first with housing without any conditions attached, and only later with other services ("Why Housing First?", Downtown Emergency Service Center, n.d.). This method has proved very effective, but unfortunately it is hard to implement in Hungary due to lack of funding, lack of social housing, difficulty to convince landlords in the private sector, and the pessimism of social workers (Bakos, n.d.; Balogi & Fehér, 2014).

Prejudice towards the homeless in Hungary

As we have seen, mistrust towards outsiders is very present in Hungarian society. Part of the explanation lies in its unique history: for centuries, it has been repeatedly attacked and occupied by more powerful peoples (Udvarhelyi, 2014); after WWI, it lost two-thirds of its territory and population to surrounding countries as defined by the Trianon Treaty; and when Communism collapsed, it left Hungarians in a material crisis as well as a crisis of insecurity and confusion (Udvarhelyi, 2014; West, 1994).

The scapegoat at which to direct these negative feelings are first the Roma. They are the largest minority in Hungary, comprising 3-8% of the population (Koulish, 2005). The negative consequences of the system change disproportionately fell on them, and now, they suffer mass unemployment and poverty, school segregation and persistent discrimination and persecution by citizens, the police and the government (Kende, 2000; Udvarhelyi, 2014).

Poverty is often framed as a "Roma problem", even though most of Hungary´s poor are not Roma (Járóka, 2010). Roma they tend to live in large families, in overcrowded slums (Breitner et al., 2002) in poor segregated villages (Jároka, 2010; Udvarhelyi, 2014). 20-30% of the

homeless may be Roma (Győri, Gurály, & Szabó, 2014; Udvarhelyi, 2014). Roma are disproportionately subject to evictions (Dér & Eberle, 1998), and homelessness among them is rising (Breitner et al., 2002), but still, they constitute only a minority of the homeless. According to Udvarhelyi (2014), though, public discourse on the Roma and on the homeless is very similar.

That discourse often revolves around "protecting the security of respectable citizens" against the danger the homeless present, while they are being more and more criminalized (Kovács, personal communication, January 30, 2015). In 2013, Hungary became the first country in the world where living on the street is illegal according to the Constitution itself (Udvarhelyi, 2014). After general sympathy for the homeless when they were a new phenomenon in the ´90s, "compassion fatigue" set in – Hungarians grew tired of them and directed their feelings of fear and frustration towards them. Today, the homeless are arrested and fined for begging, rummaging in bins or sleeping in public, and portrayed as dangerous by politicians and the media (Udvarhelyi, 2014), or as a landscape-spoiling nuisance (The City is for All, 2013; Misetics, 2010). Attempts are made at driving them away from the capital´s public spaces (Udvarhelyi, 2014; Füri, 2012; The City is for All, 2015).

A study of discrimination towards the homeless by representatives of the state found that a large majority of the homeless consider themselves discriminated, mainly by civilians, police and public space supervisors (The City is for All, 2013). They reported discrimination and humiliation in public transport, healthcare and employment. Examples are employers failing to pay homeless people for their work, denial of health treatment, destruction of tents, unnecessary ID checks all day round, or even a security guard throwing hot water on a sleeping homeless person. Interviews with people whose job brings them in contact with the homeless revealed mixed opinions. Some were positive, some expressed strong prejudice, and yet others admitted the conditions of their job gave them no choice in their treatment of the homeless.

In a study of nursing students, only 39% stated having a positive attitude towards the homeless, 24% agreed that their access to healthcare equals that of non-homeless people, and 63% approved the use of force against the homeless (Zrinyi & Balogh, 2004). In a public opinion poll, all respondents reported giving money to the homeless and supported helping them back into society, and two-thirds said they had the right to use public spaces. But many thought the homeless do not want to work or get more money from begging than an average worker in Budapest, and two-thirds supported forcing the homeless to use shelters (Győri, 2006). In another poll, a large majority agreed that the homeless should be cared for, helped to find a job, and that more shelters should be built, and only 2% that they should be punished;

but 43% supported banning them from the city centre, 31% blamed the homeless for their situation, and 74% supported forcing them to go to shelters (Győri, Gurály, & Szabó, 2014).

Hungarians seem to have ambivalent opinions on the issue. Through these polls it is also clear that there is ignorance about the true situation of the homeless, leading to inaccurate stereotypes. In reality, the homeless do what they can to get some income and survive, and only 5-20% practice begging (Breitner et al., 2002), an activity that barely permits to survive the day (Wright, 1988; Győri, 2006). In the winter of 2014, The City is for All, an advocacy group, set up posters around the city centre of Budapest to inform about homelessness and counteract stereotypes (see picture).

A poster in the centre of Budapest raising awareness about homelessness (photo by author).

Summary

In Hungary, homelessness is a symptom of the deep crisis the country experiences since the fall of Communism, and it has been unable to deal with this problem. Helping institutions cannot handle its dimensions and have to work under an essentially unhelpful government. Some cultural factors that prevail in Hungary today encourage a prejudicial norm, such as pessimism and need for certainty coupled with feelings of insecurity and mistrust (Udvarhelyi, 2014; West, 1994; Balogi & Fehér, 2014). The insecurity felt as a consequence of the crisis is, according to Udvarhelyi (2014), a cause of negative attitudes about the homeless. In terms of theories of prejudice, it seems that they are perceived as a threat and evoke collective negative

emotions. Ethnic prejudice towards the Roma resembles and probably overlaps with prejudice towards the homeless (Udvarhelyi, 2014). The homeless are widely discriminated and criminalized by the government and authority figures (Udvarhelyi, 2014; The City is for All, 2013). This punitive approach, as well as negative presentations of the homeless in the media, may further polarize public opinion. Still, in surveys, citizens support helping the homeless (Győri, 2006; Győri et al., 2014). Why this ambivalence?

Homelessness is a complex issue likely to evoke complex opinions. People may be in favour of helping the homeless in principle, but also hold many erroneous stereotypes. Most people are not aware, for example, that there are not enough shelters to accommodate all the homeless (Hajléktalanokért, 2012), that the homeless gladly accept work (Breitner et al., 2010), but that finding work is nearly impossible without already disposing of housing and income. Dangers faced by the homeless include infected wounds, violence and theft, severe underfeeding, and freezing to death (Breitner et al., 2002). People may underestimate the hardships of homeless life compared to their own, and wrongly believe that homelessness is a choice.

Finally, even if they empathize with the homeless, no politician wants their name to be associated with the homeless in the media (The City is for All, 2013), in order to be judged favourably by voters (Győri, n.d.), and authority figures may discriminate against the homeless simply to obey the expectations of their job (The City is for All, 2013). In short, politicians, governmental policy, the media, and misinformed citizens influence each other, reinforcing the societal norm in a vicious circle. Though in this case, that societal norm is negative, a positive norm could have the effect of a beneficial circle, as is the case in Scandinavia (Larsen & Dejgaard, 2013).

THE USA

Background

In the USA, mass homelessness appeared earlier than in Hungary. As explained by Rossi (1990), before the ´70s, there were few homeless, concentrated in "skid rows", hidden from view. They were mainly old white men living in cheap hotels close to railroads and other places they could work. Many were alcoholic, physically or mentally disabled. But from the end of the ´70s, skid row disappeared as low-skilled jobs were taken over by machines and the cheap

hotels destroyed, and soon the "new homeless" appeared in big numbers. They too were extremely poor, socially isolated and often disabled. But contrary to the skid row residents, they lived on the street, without any job, and could not be ignored because they were scattered everywhere. Also, they were much younger; women, families and children were among them; and African Americans were overrepresented. The McKinney Act was passed in 1987 as a reaction to the phenomenon, creating programs to fight homelessness and signing into law the obligation of the country to do so (Rossi, 1990).

Estimates of the number of homeless in the USA, which has a population of 300 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015), vary from 300,000 to 3.5 million depending on the definition (Cordray & Pion, 1991). The number has increased since the 2008 economic crisis (Lopez & Ryder, 2012). Lifetime prevalence is estimated at 6% (Dail, 2000). As in other developed countries, men are overrepresented among the American homeless (Toro, 2007), but compared to Europe, there are more families (35% of the homeless), women (22%) and people under 18 (25 %) (Dail, 2000; Shinn, 2007; Sikich, 2008). Homeless families constist mainly of single mothers with several young children (Bassuk & Rubin, 1987). Another uniquely American phenomenon is overrepresentation of war veterans (Dail, 2000). Ethnic minorities are overrepresented, especially African Americans (Dail, 2000; Rossi, 1990). Again, mental illness and drug abuse are highly prevalent (Toro, 2007). But Wright (1988) notes that many seemingly bizarre behaviours of the homeless are adaptations to the conditions of street life, and that any sane person living on the street would score high on a conventional depression scale. In a study of homeless children, Bassuk and Rubin (1987) found that half would be in need of psychiatric referral due to severe anxiety, depression and developmental delays. Wright (1988) finds it proof of mental strength that the homeless even manage to survive. Indeed, they live on 25-40% of the poverty level income, with a life expectancy of about 50 (Rossi, 1990).

In the USA, several contextual causes of homelessness can be added to the usual culprits: deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill in the ´60s-´70s, a restrictive welfare system, the recent economic recession, and lack of affordable housing (Rossi & Wright, 1987). There is even less social housing in the USA than in Hungary (McGah, 2005). The striking overrepresentation of African Americans hints to ethnic prejudice as a cause of homelessness, due to discrimination in many areas (Shinn, 2007). Despite African Americans being already disproportionately present among the poor, Gilens (1996) found that the public and media still dramatically overestimate this proportion, which may further perpetuate this ethnic prejudice.

The same kinds of services for the homeless can be found in the USA as in Hungary. State programs started with the McKinney act, which greatly improved help for the homeless, but still treated it as a temporary emergency instead of a chronic problem (Shinn, 2007). In 2009, the new HEARTH act was introduced, broadening the definition of homelessness and focusing more on prevention and on families and youth (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2008). Since every state is free to use the HEARTH funding in its own way, in some states the new Housing First approach is being implemented while others keep the older "Continuum of Care" approach (NAEH, 2008) - giving services such as job training and therapy first, under the assumption that the person will get housing when they are "ready" for reintegration into society (Bakos, n.d.).

Prejudice towards the homeless in the USA

The USA are much more advanced than Hungary in helping the homeless. Still, though homelessness is not illegal at the national level, cities criminalize the homeless: examining 187 cities, a recent report (NLCHP, 2014) found that 18% prohibit sleeping in public and 24% begging in public throughout the whole city. 53% prohibit sitting or lying down in particular public places and 9% prohibit feeding the homeless. Criminalization increased since 2011 (NLCHP, 2014). Over half of America´s 50 biggest cities remove the homeless from the public eye, especially those with few shelters or affordable housing (Minnery & Greenhalgh, 2007). Recently the United Nations Human Rights Committee criticized the USA for violating international human rights through their criminalization of the homeless (UN, 2014).

When the homeless first appeared in the ´70s, they drew immediate sympathy. But already in the ´80s, politicians and media started portraying them as lazy freeloaders taking advantage of welfare (Guzewicz & Takooshian, 1992). This led to media reports that Americans showed "compassion fatigue" – that their attitudes towards the homeless had worsened (Tompsett, Toro, Guzicki, Schlienz, Blume, & Lombardo, 2003). Is this so?

There are many studies available on Americans´ attitudes towards homelessness and poverty. A Public Agenda national poll (2002) found that a majority of the respondents think the homeless should not be bothered as long as they do not bother anyone, but also that the police should move them away if they drive people away from shopping areas, or if they seem disturbed or verbally threaten people. A later survey in New York City (Arumi, Yarrow, Ott, & Rochkind, 2007) found a majority of respondents stating that everyone has a right to shelter, and ready to pay more taxes to help the homeless. Structural explanations for homelessness prevailed, but individualistic explanations were also very common, and an overwhelming

majority thought that benefits for the homeless should be tied to conditions like psychological treatment or job training.

In examining the effect of education on attitudes to homelessness, Phelan, Link, Stueve and Moore (1995) found that higher levels of education did not change attitudes about the homeless´ rights, led to more tolerance for them, but to less support for their economic aid. Their suggested explanation for these peculiar findings is that education socializes students to the normative American values: tolerance and equality, but also meritocracy, due to the belief that equal opportunity really exists. From this view, the homeless are to be respected as people, but their situation is their own responsibility.

It was found that attitudes towards the homeless are less compassionate in the USA than in several European countries, however, a big majority everywhere would be willing to pay more taxes to help them (Toro et al., 2007). Comparing the USA with Germany, Tompsett et al. (2003) rejected the idea of compassion fatigue in the USA, and acknowledged that Americans are more compassionate and well-informed than commonly thought, but still found Germans more compassionate than Americans. The authors thought the difference could be due to stronger values of harmony in Germany and of self-reliant individualism in the USA, and a more comprehensive welfare system in Germany than in the USA. Because everyone in Germany has a right to state assistance, there is less concern over who does or does not deserve aid. This argument is reminiscent of Larsen and Dejgaard´s (2013) explanation.

Buck, Toro and Ramos (2004) studied media coverage of homelessness from 1974 to 2003. Coverage of homelessness increased throughout the ´80s for popular media and ´90s for professional journals. It was mainly sympathetic in popular media, with no evidence of compassion fatigue, but professional journals focused more on deviance than on structural causes of homelessness.

Some researchers have compared attitudes towards the homeless and the poor in general. According to Guzewicz and Takooshian (1992), people have more sympathy towards the homeless than the poor, because their distress is more visible and should be remediable, whereas poverty is perceived simply as an inevitable fact of life. In their study, opinion of the homeless varied widely from sympathy to disgust. Sympathy was correlated negatively with just world beliefs, authoritarianism, and surprisingly, social desirability. This last finding may suggest that the socially desirable norm among Americans is to criticize the homeless. In Wilson´s (1996) study, people explained poverty more in individualistic and homelessness more in structural terms. He hypothesized that the values of American culture generally promote beliefs in individual responsibility, but that the special attention of the media for the

homeless, depicting them as victims of the system, gave them the status of societal problem. Lee, Jones and Lewis (1990) reached similar conclusions.

Other studies argue that opinion of the homeless is more negative than that of the poor in general, precisely because they are more visible. They are also more disruptive, unappealing, and homelessness is associated with other stigmatizing conditions (as cited in Lopez & Ryder, 2012). Phelan, Link, Moore and Stueve (1997) presented a story about a man to participants, varying two factors: whether the man was homeless or "just" poor, and whether he was mentally ill or not. Attitudes towards him were quite positive in general, but compared to the poor man, the homeless man elicited more social distance, and the mentally ill man was perceived as more dangerous and needing assistance. The effects of homelessness and mental illness were additive. Thus, homelessness is stigmatized more than poverty, and this is worsened by the stereotypic association of homelessness with mental illness.

Summary

Although the homeless have it better in the USA than in Hungary, they are still being criminalized in some cities (NLCHP, 2014). Surveys find ambivalent attitudes towards them among Americans (Phelan et al., 1995; Arumi et al., 2007): sympathetic opinions and resentment are both common. This might be because the USA are a huge, heterogeneous country, so one could hardly expect a consensus. Studies differ in their samples, measurement methods, and when they were carried out. But contradicting findings can also be explained by American values, which emphasize individual rights and freedom as well as responsibility and effort. The dominant ideology is that everyone has an opportunity of succeeding, everyone is reponsible for their own situation, and the system is fair (as cited in Knecht & Martinez, 2009). People might be willing to show some respect and help for the homeless, while believing that they are mainly responsible for their own plight and should be moved away if they act botheringly (Public Agenda, 2002).

Attitudes clearly change with time. Sympathy towards the homeless prevailed at the beginning (Guzewicz & Takooshian, 1992), and although blame might have slightly increased since, no clear evidence was found of widespread compassion fatigue neither in the ´90s nor in recent studies, contrary to what many had proposed (Tompsett et al., 2003; Buck et al., 2004). Researchers disagree on whether attitudes towards the homeless are more or less compassionate than towards the poor in general. Some argue that there is more sympathy for the homeless because of their status as a societal problem, emphasizing the role of the media in shaping public opinion (Guzewicz & Takooshian, 1992; Wilson, 1996). Others find that the

homeless are stigmatized more than the poor due to their disruptive presence and association with other stigmatized conditions (Phelan et al., 1997). Finally, the legacy of centuries of racism is still seen in the overrepresentation of African Americans among the homeless, and in the stereotypes the media perpetuate (Rossi, 1990; Gilens, 1996).

A COMPARISON

Homelessness exists against a different historical and societal background in Hungary and the USA, and many differences can be observed as a result. Mass homelessness started sooner in the USA, and both research on the subject and helping programs are much ahead compared to Hungary. Prejudice and discrimination towards the homeless are also more blatant in Hungary than in the USA. Furthermore, tracking tendencies from the appearance of mass homelessness to now, recent compassion fatigue can clearly be seen in Hungary but not in the USA. This is due to the discussed societal conditions unique to Hungary that encourage stigmatization while making it difficult to deal with the problem of homelessness. According to Udvarhelyi (2014), the transition to become an independent democracy is very hard for Hungary, since it had never really been one. She argues that the recent criminalization is similar to treatment of the homeless under Communism, but without the accompanying social infrastructure to prevent homelessness in the first place.

However, striking similarities can also be seen. In both countries, homelessness is a pervasive issue that appeared relatively recently on a large scale, and the homeless are increasingly criminalized. Their social systems also show common characteristics. Recently Hungary has started to resemble the USA in many respects such as high inequality, crisis of the economy and social welfare, and a highly punitive legal system (Misetics, 2010); it is a mix of American-style capitalism and returned Communist-style authority (Udvarhelyi, 2014). According to Misetics (2010), high penalizing occurs when a societal crisis needs to be contained. It seems that Western capitalism and transition from Communism both create unique challenges, the latter being a problem of Hungary, whereas the former is characteristic both for the USA and for Hungary. This situation can be contrasted to that in Scandinavia, Germany and some other Western European countries, where societal crisis is less present and the welfare system is generous (Larsen & Dejgaard, 2013; Tompsett et al., 2003).

Both countries show similar effects of psychological mechanisms and cultural norms and values on prejudice. Cognitive biases operate to help people make sense of their social environment, especially in a critical situation, as can be found in Hungary and the USA. Prejudice appears especially when an outgroup is perceived to threaten our ingroup and evokes negative emotions in members of our group; this seems to be the case for both countries, but especially Hungary. The belief in a just world, an important factor of prejudice towards disadvantaged groups, is very present in both societies. So is ethnic prejudice, particularly towards African Americans in the USA and Roma in Hungary, and this accompanies and reinforces prejudice towards the homeless. The victim-blaming that accompanies just world beliefs can be contrasted with values of compassion and care that appear stronger in countries like Scandinavia and Germany.

Each country has their own combination of cultural values that moderate stigmatization of the homeless. In Hungary, there is a strong need for hierarchy, security and stability, arguably corresponding to Hofstede´s (1983) dimensions of power distance and uncertainty avoidance. These values coupled with the discussed sociohistorical conditions encourage prejudice. In the USA, valuing of individual rights and freedom may counteract prejudice, whereas valuing of individual responsibility and effort encourages blaming the homeless. Both aspects coexist and are related to Hofstede´s individualism dimension. Finally, these different combinations of factors in both countries lead to a similar ambivalence of public opinion, whereby non-homeless people display both sympathy and a set of negative stereotypes towards the homeless.

Limitations of literature

I would like to note that it is very hard to find any scientific research on public opinions about the homeless in Hungary, either because it does not exist or is hard to access. When it does, it is usually written by foreign researchers. Most literature I found concerning Hungary came from governmental institutions or advocacy groups, which compromises its scientific objectivity. An example is the study of the discrimination of homeless people by The City is for All (2013). Homeless people themselves played a significant role in carrying out the project, which might have biased the results. According to sociologist Róbert Kovács, homelessness is a sensitive subject in Hungary even among scientists, and research focuses mainly on the situation of the homeless rather than society´s attitude towards them, which is rather a subject for politicians (Kovács, personal communication, January 30, 2015). In contrast, for the USA, a

large amount of scientific literature on the subject can be found in psychological, sociological and other journals.

Philippot et al. (2007) already noted that in the USA, there are many scientific studies on homelessness, whereas in Europe, only half of the research on homelessness is actually carried out by academics. It is mostly funded by the government and directly policy-oriented. Many studies are qualitative and not widely available. This may also be the reason why, as reported by Toro (2007), American research tends to analyse homelessness at the individual and European research at the sociocultural level.

However, an advantage is that Hungarian sources were more recent. The literature about the USA is often dated: half of the sources are more than 15 years old. Furthermore, some empirical studies suffered from issues with representativeness of participants and various problems of methodology (oversimplifying by using a forced-choice question; suggestive wording of questions; using an unrepresentative story to assess opinion), which may have biased the results.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Future research in the USA should continue to monitor Americans´ general attitudes to the homeless. Shifts of opinion over time could be tracked and linked to changes in policy, economic situation, or media attention. Hungarian psychologists, sociologists and other researchers should start carrying out systematic research on Hungarians´ attitudes towards the homeless, since foreign researchers may be limited by lack of background knowledge and language skills, and advocacy groups lack neutrality. The latter could leave the task of research up to scientists and concentrate their efforts on help and advocacy, relaying accurate information to the public based on scientific study as well as their own experience. It would be interesting to review the relationship between societal factors and prejudice towards the homeless in other post-Communist countries, and observe which patterns found in Hungary are unique and which are common to those countries. In general, I would encourage further research into the interaction of contextual factors with prejudice, studying different marginalized groups and societies around the world.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this essay was to show how contextual factors in a society might affect the extent and expression of prejudice by public opinion towards a marginalized group. Public attitudes towards the homeless in Hungary and the USA were compared and similarities and differences explained from a sociocultural point of view.

Prejudice develops as a way of coping with negative feelings and making sense of the world in uncertain situations. Many reasons make the homeless an ideal target of prejudice. They are perceived as both unsympathetic and incompetent, their behaviour and appearance are disturbing, and they may evoke fear and contempt. Misconceptions include beliefs that the homeless are dangerous and alcoholic, that they are entirely responsible for their own situation and thus do not deserve much help, and that they are freeloaders: they do not want to work and live a relatively comfortable life, taking advantage of other people´s efforts.

This prejudice towards the homeless is influenced by a complex interplay of cultural norms and values, societal history, political decisions and media portrayals. Even when they concern the same marginalized group, attitudes can differ across societies and change dynamically over time. On the other hand, despite very different context and background, a situation that is similar in many respects emerged in the two societies used as example.

I hope that the attempted analysis can contribute to a better understanding of the complex phenomenon of prejudice and add to already existing models and frameworks. Finally, I would like to emphasize that giving extensive and accurate information about the homeless to the public is crucial to address widespread negative stereotypes. Without this, the risk of stigmatization and unfair punishment of the homeless by a society will continue to exist.

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