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# Poverty and the Poor in the Media Discourse in Poland: Compassion or Blame?

Ubóstwo i osoby ubogie  
w dyskursie medialnym w Polsce –  
współczucie czy obwinianie?

## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to show how poverty and the people who experience it are presented by various media (press, television programmes, etc.) in Poland. Referring to research and media analyses of the representation of this phenomenon, attempts were made to reveal the causes and valuations attributed to it. The media discourse on poverty shapes and proliferates social perceptions about it. It is crucial because it influences how fellow citizens treat the poor and policies aimed at minimising this phenomenon. Two dominant mass media narratives about those affected by poverty can be divided as follows: 1) the deserving poor worthy of support because their poverty is due to external sources beyond their power, and 2) the undeserving poor, who are themselves responsible for their material situation due to bad attitudes, habits, and deviant behaviours.

**Keywords:** poverty, the poor, media discourse, mass media

## Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest ukazanie w jaki sposób przedstawiane jest ubóstwo i osoby go doświadczające przez różne środki masowego przekazu (prasa, programy telewizyjne, itp.) w Polsce. Odwołując się do badań i analiz medialnych reprezentacji tego zjawiska starano się wyeksponować przypisywane mu przyczyny i wartościowanie. Dyskurs medialny na temat ubóstwa zarówno kształtuje, jak i powiela społeczne wyobrażenia o nim. Jest istotny, gdyż wpływa na sposób traktowania biednych przez współobywateli oraz polityki mające na celu minimalizację tego zjawiska. Można wyodrębnić dwa dominujące typy narracji środków masowego przekazu na temat biednych, jako: 1) zasługujących na

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wsparcie ze względu na zewnątrz w stosunku do nich czynniki losowe będące źródłem ich ubóstwa oraz 2) niezasługujących, którzy są sami winni swojej sytuacji materialnej ze względu na złe postawy, nawyki i dewiacyjne zachowania.

**Słowa kluczowe:** ubóstwo, biedni, dyskurs medialny, media masowe

## Introduction

Poverty is a social problem facing some citizens in all countries. In Poland, depending on the measurement method, it is experienced by 4.2% (absolute poverty) to 12% (relative poverty) of residents.<sup>1</sup> As Zygmunt Bauman notes, there will always be poor people in society, but what it really means to be poor depends on other members of society who do not experience poverty.<sup>2</sup> This problem has never been an indifferent object of research or social observation but is evaluated and ideologically described. It is always accompanied in some way by emotions and entanglement in the context of dominant values, politics, and ideology.<sup>3</sup> Due to the range of influence on the audience and the power of persuasion, the mass media provide viewers with possible explanations and grounds for interpreting social processes and human behaviour.<sup>4</sup> Media discourse on poverty can shape social opinion, influence social attitudes towards the poor by stigmatising and blaming them, or shape social sensitivity and the idea of subsidiarity, showing the multidimensionality of this phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> The discourse of the mass media influences how people experiencing poverty are perceived by the general public, how this problem is solved by shaping public policies on poverty, as well as by self-perception of the less fortunate.<sup>6</sup>

This article aims to show how poverty and poor people are presented by various mass media (press, television programmes, etc.) in Poland. Referring to the research and media analysis of the representation of this phenomenon,

<sup>1</sup> *Zasięg ubóstwa ekonomicznego w Polsce w 2021r.*, GUS, Warsaw 2022, pp. 1, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Z. Bauman, *Praca, konsumpcjonizm i nowi ubodzy*, tłum. S. Obirek, Wydawnictwo WAM, Kraków 2006, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> E. Tarkowska, *Wprowadzenie*, in: *Dyskursy ubóstwa i wykluczenia społecznego*, ed. E. Tarkowska, Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, Warsaw 2013, pp. 15, 33.

<sup>4</sup> M. Lisowska-Magdziarz, *Ubóstwo jako problem estetyczny: medialne reprezentacje polskiej "underclass"*, "Kultura Współczesna" 2018, vol. 103, no. 4, p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> D. Zaworska-Nikoniuk, *Medialne (re)prezentacje biedy i bogactwa w programie rozrywkowym: „Biedny dom – bogaty dom” emitowanym w Polsat Cafe – perspektywa badań pedagogicznych*, "Wychowanie w Rodzinie" 2022, vol. 27, no. 2, p. 381.

<sup>6</sup> M. Kostecki, *Pokoleniowo reprodukowana odmienność kulturowa w dyskursie. Powracający spór o underclass i kulturę ubóstwa*, in: *Pokoleniowy potencjał polityki*, eds. M. Mikołajczyk, A. Tasak, Instytut Wydawniczy Książka i Prasa, Warsaw 2021, p. 339.

this article attempts to expose the causes, valuations, and emotions attributed to it. It is for review purposes.

## Defining Poverty and Looking for Its Causes

One of the most serious social problems that still exist in the 21st century is poverty.<sup>7</sup> It is, in a sense, a universal phenomenon that occurs in both highly developed and underdeveloped countries.<sup>8</sup> Poverty is considered in many fields of science (e.g. economics, sociology) and social practice (e.g. social policy, social work). However, defining poverty is not a simple matter. Many definitions have been formulated in the literature, each with different implications as to its causes, approaches, and solutions. In many cultures, it is viewed as the opposite of wealth; hence one of the most common definitions of poverty uses the income approach. Income-based definitions treat it as a condition in which individuals lack the financial means to meet their basic needs and/or achieve a minimum (absolute poverty) or socially acceptable (relative poverty) standard of living.<sup>9</sup>

Increasingly, poverty appears as a complex, multidimensional phenomenon of various nature: economic, social, and cultural. As Elżbieta Tarkowska notes, this problem is not only a matter of insufficient and low income but also of shortages in many areas, for example, health, education, and participation in political and cultural life.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, many approaches stress that there are other non-financial dimensions of poverty, such as housing, health and access to medical care, level and access to education, social ties, the possibility of participation in social and political life, etc.<sup>11</sup>

The differences between rich and poor people do not concern only the issue of having (or not having) money but cover almost all dimensions of social life. The indigent lack a basic sense of security and the ability to control circumstances related to one's life. Poverty is life within structural constraints; it is a situation that prevents individuals and their families from fulfilling roles and duties, exercising fundamental rights or social participation.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> K. Frysztański, *Rewizytując problem ubóstwa (odwołując się do tuzina głosów: jedenastu Amerykańskich i jednego Polskiego)*, "Zeszyty Pracy Socjalnej" 2022, vol. 24, no. 3, p. 155.

<sup>8</sup> S. Fel, T. Adamczyk, *Wstęp*, in: *Oblicza współczesnej biedy*, eds. eidem, Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin 2015, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> F. Misurelli, C. Heffernan, *What is poverty? A Diachronic Exploration of the Discourse on Poverty from the 1970s to the 2000s*, "The European Journal of Development Research" 2008, vol. 20, no. 4, p. 666.

<sup>10</sup> E. Tarkowska, *Zrozumieć biednego. O dawnej i obecnej biedzie w Polsce*, Wydawnictwo „Typografia”, Warsaw 2000, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> F. Misurelli, C. Heffernan, *What is Poverty...*, pp. 667–668.

<sup>12</sup> R. Lister, *Bieda*, tłum. A. Stanaszek, Wydawnictwo Sic!, Warsaw 2007, pp. 16, 23, 49, 69.

A key aspect of understanding poverty is to identify its sources. The debate on its cause seems to be particularly important because the choice of a particular option entails practical implications for what should be done to prevent and reduce poverty effectively. The simplest systematisation of considerations concerning the sources of poverty distinguishes between objective and subjective causes. The first includes economic, socio-political, sociodemographic, and random factors. The second category comprises causes resulting from people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours.<sup>13</sup> Most theories explaining the origin of poverty can be divided into three broad categories: behavioural (or subjective), structural (or objective-structural), and political.<sup>14</sup>

Subjective theories see the sources of poverty in the personal characteristics of individuals, their abilities and choices, character, and attitude to life (this category distinguishes, for example, theories of corrupted characters and culture of poverty).<sup>15</sup> The theory of corrupted characters locates the causes of this problem in the characteristics of the individual. Each individual has a certain set of skills that they should develop through their own activity. Investing in existing skills and choosing what will bring the greatest benefits in the future is protection against poverty in the form of high income. In addition, society undertakes aid activities in relation to the less fortunate; if they are not able to use them effectively, it means that they resign themselves to the fate of a poor person.<sup>16</sup> Cultural concepts of poverty portray such individuals as having a specific subculture (beliefs, behaviours, lifestyle) that differs from the culture of the rest of the (non-poor) part of society.<sup>17</sup> The culture of poverty is a way of life (life pattern) that is relatively persistent in poor environments and passed down from generation to generation in the process of socialisation. Generational reproduction by the indigent of certain norms and values (usually considered negative by other members of society) distinguishes them from other social categories (e.g. elite, middle class).<sup>18</sup> Conservative supporters of this focused almost exclusively on individual characteristics, norms, values, and orientations as opposed to middle-class values. Emphasising mainly personal responsibility and guilt of the indigent for their fate and linking poverty with social pathologies

<sup>13</sup> A. Pollok, *Metody analizy ekonomicznej zjawiska ubóstwa*, "Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny" 2002, vol. 64, no. 4, p. 152.

<sup>14</sup> D. Brady, *Theories of the Causes of Poverty*, "Annual Review of Sociology" 2019, vol. 45, p. 155.

<sup>15</sup> S. Golinowska, *Uwagi o ubóstwie i jego zwalczaniu*, "Polityka Społeczna" 1997, no. 1, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> J. Łukaszewska, C. Żołędowski, *Kultura czy struktura – dyskurs teorii i spory doktrynalne o przyczyny ubóstwa*, in: *Ubóstwo i wykluczenie społeczne – perspektywa poznawcza*, eds. R. Szarfenberg, C. Żołędowski, M. Theiss, Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, Warsaw 2010, p. 80.

<sup>17</sup> J. Grotowska-Leder, *Współczesne ubóstwo w perspektywie strukturalnej*, in: *Nowy ład? Dynamika struktur społecznych we współczesnych społeczeństwach*, eds. J. Grotowska-Leder, E. Rokicka, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2013, p. 140.

<sup>18</sup> M. Kostecki, *Pokoleniowo reprodukowana odmienność kulturowa w dyskursie...*, p. 344.

(e.g. limited control of urges, tendency to use violence, passivity in life, promiscuity) became the basis for judgments seeing the source of a worse financial situation only in people experiencing it.<sup>19</sup>

An alternative explanation of the causes of scarcity to the concept of corrupt characters and the culture of poverty is structural theories that see the sources of this problem in the individual's position in the social structure. The cause of destitution is considered a phenomenon external to the individual (mainly related to the labour market and the economy), e.g. recession, limited opportunities, structural unemployment, underdevelopment of a region or country, poor education system causing difficulties in obtaining qualifications, low wages, high prices, exploitation of workers.<sup>20</sup> Poverty is seen here as an accumulation of social inequalities, or a syndrome of features of social situation, which refers to the location of individuals and individual communities in the social structure. It is, then, linked to power relations, social barriers to social advancement, and the distribution of wealth and income.<sup>21</sup>

Another way to explain the causes of destitution is through political theories that emphasise the importance of state action. State policies may contain or cause impoverishment by carrying out activities that encourage the emergence and development of significant social inequalities<sup>22</sup>. It may also be the case that the state acts ineffectively in the fight against this problem (the so-called "Big Brother" theories); e.g. it provides benefits but does not help to find another solution by stimulating economic activity. This leads to a situation where it is not profitable for people benefiting from state support to take up official work.<sup>23</sup> The causes of poverty are also seen in chance events. In this context, its sources lie in person, however not in their character traits, but in the situation in which they found themselves due to, for example, chronic illness or disability.<sup>24</sup>

## Media Discourse as a Tool for Constructing Reality

Attitudes towards poverty, in particular, the treatment of poor people by fellow citizens, representatives of social welfare institutions, officials, and politicians, largely depend on the dominant discourse or discourses.<sup>25</sup> These discourses are

<sup>19</sup> E. Tarkowska, *Zrozumieć biednego...*, p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> S. Golinowska, *Uwagi o ubóstwie i jego zwalczaniu...*, pp. 3–4.

<sup>21</sup> D. Brady, *Theories of the Causes of Poverty...*, p. 155.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>23</sup> J. Łukaszewska, C. Żołędowski, *Kultura czy struktura...*, pp. 79–80.

<sup>24</sup> A. Pollok, *Metody analizy ekonomicznej zjawiska ubóstwa...*, p. 154.

<sup>25</sup> I. Kudlińska, *Stygmatyzacja społeczna jako strategia dyskursywna biedy i jej rola w procesie wykluczenia społecznego*, "Kultura i Społeczeństwo" 2012, no. 1, p. 176.

social ways of constructing and presenting poverty and those stricken by it, present in public life, institutions, social creations, and the practice of social life.<sup>26</sup> Social discourse is a communicative phenomenon understood as a statement or text in a social context. It is a kind of social interaction with the use of language, which, however, is not a neutral tool but a carrier of values and beliefs.<sup>27</sup>

The shape of the discourse depends on the relationship between its participants. On the one hand, it depends on socio-cultural conditions and constitutes social constructs, and on the other hand, it takes part in the construction of social life.<sup>28</sup> In discourse, we can identify various manifestations of power, imposing meanings, and defining social rules. Discourse is, therefore, mainly a tool for modelling human consciousness by influencing how we perceive the surrounding world.<sup>29</sup>

There are many types of discourse. The most commonly used division criteria are institutional, indicating the participants of the discourse, ideological, medium of communication, and topic. As Tomasz Goban-Klas notes, the mass media are now increasingly becoming the “first” rather than the “fourth power” and impose interpretations of concepts and meanings on society.<sup>30</sup> Many media recipients build their idea of the world around them on what they learn from the mass media. The coverage affects their way of understanding themselves and the perception of others, assessing social phenomena.<sup>31</sup> The media play a central, or at least important, role in modern society when it comes to defining and explaining civic affairs. They function as a normalising forum for the social construction of reality. They are vital subjects in the public process of constructing, contesting, or maintaining a discourse on social cohesion and integration.<sup>32</sup>

One of the most significant discourses is the media discourse, i.e. one-way communication through mass media, creating statements about public destiny. The goal of an institutionalised broadcaster is to channel public attention and

<sup>26</sup> E. Tarkowska, *Wprowadzenie...*, p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> T. van Dijk, *Dyskurs jako struktura i proces*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2001, p. 11 et seq.

<sup>28</sup> N. Fairclough, J. Mulderrig, R. Wodak, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, in: *Discourse Studies. A Multidisciplinary Introduction*, ed. T.A. van Dijk, SAGE, London 2011, p. 358.

<sup>29</sup> A. Piotrowski, *Tożsamość zbiorowa jako temat dyskursu polityki*, in: *Rytualny chaos. Studium dyskursu publicznego*, eds. M. Czyżewski, S. Kowalski, A. Piotrowski, Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warsaw 2010, pp. 186–188.

<sup>30</sup> T. Goban-Klas, *Media i komunikowanie masowe. Teorie i analiza prasy, radia, telewizji i Internetu*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2005, p. 20.

<sup>31</sup> J. Dobrołowicz, *Mediatyzacja współczesności a procesy socjalizacji i wychowania*, “Paedagogia Christiana” 2014, vol. 34, no. 2, p. 137.

<sup>32</sup> E. Fursich, *Media and the Representation of Others*, “International Social Science Journal” 2010, vol. 61, no. 199, p. 113.

shape the audience's views. Within the framework of media discourse, its types can be distinguished according to the type of data transmission (e.g. press, radio, television discourse) or subject matter (e.g. poverty).<sup>33</sup>

It should be noted that the communication behaviour of the media is not selfless. Their communication reflects social hierarchies and power relations in relationships between people, defines important concepts, establishes values hierarchies, and influences what issues are considered significant and noteworthy by society.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, representation in the mainstream media of various areas of everyday life, however insignificant it may seem, does contribute to the understanding and evaluation of social processes and behaviours of individuals.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, it is essential to study how reality is presented in the media, what social values are shown as important, and how social relations are defined. Therefore, it is essential to diagnose what is depicted and what is omitted, what appears in the foreground and what is a marginal topic, and what processes are used to describe and explain specific phenomena.<sup>36</sup>

## Poverty and the Poor in Selected Mass Media in Poland

Poverty has never been and still is not a phenomenon to which society (including media coverage) is indifferent or neutral. Depicting, perceiving, or talking about it is always accompanied by emotions and evaluation. It was and remains entangled in the context of values, dominant ideologies, politics, etc. Media discourse, on the one hand, can shape social opinion about poverty and those affected by it (due to the range of influence and the power of persuasion), and, on the other hand, it often propagates social ideas about this phenomenon, further reinforcing them.<sup>37</sup>

In Poland (as in most countries), mainly fragmentary analyses of the media discourse on poverty and poor people were carried out. Most focus on specific mass media (e.g. press, television, etc.) and include specific media messages and titles (e.g. current affairs weeklies, tabloids, daily press, entertainment programmes, series, intervention programmes, etc.). Almost all analyses of media discourse indicate (regardless of medium type) that poverty and the less fortunate are discussed relatively rarely. There are types of messages in which this

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<sup>33</sup> I. Loewe, *Dyskurs medialny – przegląd stanowisk badawczych*, "Forum Lingwistyczne" 2014, no. 1, p. 14.

<sup>34</sup> M. Lisowska-Magdziarz, *Analiza tekstu w dyskursie medialnym*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2006, p. 8.

<sup>35</sup> M. Lisowska-Magdziarz, *Ubóstwo jako problem estetyczny...*, p. 59.

<sup>36</sup> N. Fairclough, *Media Discourse*, Hodder Education, London 1995, pp. 17, 104.

<sup>37</sup> E. Tarkowska, *Wprowadzenie...*, p. 11, 14.

phenomenon is presented slightly more often (e.g. intervention programmes, tabloids) than in others (e.g. entertainment programmes). Still, media interest in social problems (including poverty) is low. It is, therefore, not a comfortable topic, attractive for a typical recipient of mass media, often looking mainly for entertainment and pleasure.<sup>38</sup> However, this is not typical only for media coverage in Poland. Analysis of newspapers, TV, and radio programmes in the UK has also shown that poverty is not a frequent focus of media attention; it is not treated as a major topic.<sup>39</sup> Importantly, when the subject of poverty is addressed, it is generally presented from an external perspective, i.e. the voices of people living in poverty are rarely taken into account; they are not given a voice but are talked about instead.<sup>40</sup>

Destitution is not directly shown, especially in entertainment programmes, as it is not a visually appealing topic, and the less fortunate are not the target audience of advertisements. The narrative about poverty, however, exists in the entertainment media, but it is not formulated directly but through denial, i.e. offering a simple solution on how not to be poor or not to show that you necessarily are. This way of talking about poverty is typical of many so-called makeover shows (e.g. *Projekt Lady*, *Dzientelmeni i wieśniacy*). These programmes present ready-made solutions on how to use simple tricks (e.g. proper selection of clothes, diet and exercise, makeup, etc.) to change your image to a more suitable middle class. Destitution, then, is a condition that can be easily left behind through motivation, discipline, change of attitude, or lifestyle, leading to success and social advancement.<sup>41</sup> In entertainment programmes, material deprivation is often also a kind of element of sensation, and the creators of messages refer to human impulses of curiosity and “voyeurism” by presenting homes and activities of people who live below the subsistence minimum (e.g. *Biedny dom – bogaty dom*, whose essence is the exchange of houses and budgets of two families – the poor and the rich and *Damy i wieśniaczki* based on a similar premise). Poverty in these programmes is almost something exotic. Like in travel programs, we can observe the interiors of impoverished houses (usually dirty, mouldy, and neglected) and the struggles of individuals or families with everyday difficulties. Importantly, these programmes do not explain the causes or mechanisms of different social statuses juxtaposed in the episode of people/families. Instead, they reinforce the stereotypical image of indigence and wealth. The less fortunate live in dirty apartments, are helpless,

<sup>38</sup> M. Lisowska-Magdziarz, *Reprezentacje biedy i wykluczenia społecznego w tabloidach i mediach głównego nurtu*, “Środkowoeuropejskie Studia Polityczne” 2013, no. 1, p. 33.

<sup>39</sup> A. Chauhan, J. Foster, *Representations of Poverty in British Newspapers: A Case of ‘Othering’ the Threat?*, “Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology” 2014, vol. 24, no. 5, p. 397.

<sup>40</sup> T. Kanasz, *Media masowe wobec biedy w Polsce*, “Adeptus. Pismo humanistów” 2017, no. 10, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> M. Lisowska-Magdziarz, *Ubóstwo jako problem estetyczny...*, p. 63.



and have often made poor life choices. On the other hand, the rich are portrayed as people who have achieved success through hard work and education, derive satisfaction from work, and their children are healthy and happy.<sup>42</sup>

A vital element of the analysis of media discourse on poverty is the question of how to identify its sources. Most studies of media discourse on this subject show that the indigent are presented in one of two main but opposite frameworks: the “undeserving poor” and the “deserving poor.” The “undeserving poor” are depicted as responsible for their material conditions because of the pathological nature of their actions and as a burden on the rest of society living in harmony with social norms. The “deserving poor” are presented as victims of circumstance. They are treated with kindness, and the audiences are told about their difficult situation, and this should arouse compassion and empathy. Media narratives about indigence generally oscillate between two variants: 1) blaming people experiencing poverty for their situation or 2) showing compassion, i.e. promoting pity and empathy towards them.<sup>43</sup>

In media coverage, poverty is very often seen in the personal characteristics of individuals (according to theories of corrupt characters or an extreme version of the culture of poverty). The cause of destitution in these messages is the attitudes of people experiencing it, their character, life choices, and deviant behaviour (e.g. passivity, laziness, lack of skills, learned helplessness, demanding attitude). This way of creating the less fortunate is characteristic of all forms of media communication (daily and tabloid press, news programmes, etc.). The needy are presented here as those who navigate the social benefits system, do not work, or work in the so-called grey area.<sup>44</sup> They are described as reluctant to make any effort to change their fate. Indigence is not presented as a consequence of significant social inequalities, economic and structural conditions, or specific conditions in which some people live but as a result of negative personality traits and the tendency to break generally applicable norms. Some individuals are viewed as living in poverty, partly at their own fault because they do not have the will to exhibit correct social behaviour.<sup>45</sup> This poverty narrative is very often associated with various social pathologies, in particular, alcoholism, drug addiction, domestic violence, or crime. Linking destitution with deviant and criminal behaviour not only stigmatises the poor but also arouses fear towards them. It also leads to a kind of dehumanisation of this group.<sup>46</sup> This perspective

<sup>42</sup> D. Zaworska-Nikoniuk, *Medialne (re)prezentacje biedy...*, p. 392.

<sup>43</sup> J. Lugo-Ocando, *Poverty in the News Media: Continuities, Ruptures, and Change in the Reporting Socioeconomic Inequality*, “Sociology Compass” 2019, vol. 13, no. 7, p. 2.

<sup>44</sup> A. Duda, *Medialne reprezentacje biedy*, “Roczniki Kulturoznawcze” 2019, vol. 10, no. 4, p. 17.

<sup>45</sup> K. Górniak, *Praca w sytuacji ubóstwa – o pewnej nieoczywistości*, “Władza sąđenia” 2017, vol. 11, p. 79.

<sup>46</sup> M. Lisowska-Magdziarz, *Ubóstwo jako problem estetyczny...*, pp. 61–62.

deprives people experiencing poverty of their social and economic context and distances others from people experiencing material deprivation. And it does not lead to the formation of a sense of responsibility for people experiencing poverty but to the perception of them as an economic burden. Therefore, mitigation of this problem must be carried out by means of control and supervision of those affected.<sup>47</sup> The indigent are a kind of “exotic species” that other members of society can treat in the category of “other” or “alien” among us. The stigmatising discourse on poverty usually leads to stigmatising politics.<sup>48</sup> Financial transfers are also presented as an economic burden, which may turn out to be a support for families experiencing material deprivation. For example, the media narrative about indigence following the so-called Big Brother theories is present in the weekly *Newsweek Polska*. Criticism of the “Rodzina 500+” programme in the press focuses on presenting poorer beneficiaries of this programme as morally corrupt, prone to pathological behaviour (drunkenness, vulgarity, quarrelsome, bribery), and lazy as a result of receiving a financial benefit.<sup>49</sup>

In the media discourse, some narratives present the destitute as worthy of support. They found themselves in a difficult financial situation due to external factors, chance events, e.g. illness, disability, old age, bad luck, and natural disasters. Poverty is presented here as a result of uncontrollable random factors or as a result of the actions of others. This way of depicting indigence can be seen in television programmes aimed at helping people in difficult life situations, such as intervention or reality TV programmes. An example of such a programme can be *Nasz nowy dom*, which presents families living in difficult housing conditions due to extreme poverty resulting from having people with disabilities, chronically ill and the elderly in the family. The participants’ stories are filled with narration about the difficulties and shame they experience in connection with living in poor conditions. The participants of such programmes share their emotions and traumatic experiences, and describe and show their dramatic financial situation.<sup>50</sup>

A similar presentation of this problem can be seen in selected articles in the tabloid press (e.g. *Super Express*, *Fakt*) or in the daily newspapers (e.g. *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita*). Poor people (usually identified by name) are shown as “victims of the system” of, for example, bureaucracy, officials,

<sup>47</sup> M. Kostecki, *Pokoleniowo reprodukowana odmienność kulturowa w dyskursie...*, pp. 346–347.

<sup>48</sup> R. Lister, *Bieda...*, p. 126–129.

<sup>49</sup> M. Kostecki, *Relacyjno-symboliczne aspekty ubóstwa w dyskursie politycznym na temat programu „Rodzina 500+”*. Przypadek tygodnika „Newsweek Polska”, *“Studia Politologica”* 2018, vol. 20, no. 274, pp. 34–35.

<sup>50</sup> J. Jędrych, *Biedny jako Inny. Stereotypizacja ubogiego na przykładzie wybranych programów telewizyjnych*, in: *Antropologia, media, komunikacja*, eds. M. Czapiga, M. Rydlewski, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2019, pp. 88–90.

soulless regulations, or specific people implementing these regulations.<sup>51</sup> This way of narration is very characteristic of the tabloid press, where “the plight of ordinary people” characterised by a widespread lack of money and the ability to meet basic needs (e.g. food, medicines) is juxtaposed with the wealth and arrogance of the elite (enriched by embezzlement, corruption, and abuse).<sup>52</sup> Indigence is also sometimes presented as a “problem to be solved” that can be reduced by adopting specific solutions (e.g. changing legal regulations) or the activity of other members of the public, i.e. thanks to human solidarity and charitable activities.<sup>53</sup>

Media discourse analysis indicates that the narrative about the structural and objective causes of poverty is relatively rare. It sometimes appears in the weekly newspapers, e.g. *Rzeczpospolita*. In some articles, this problem is presented as a consequence of social inequalities and a manifestation of the dysfunctional nature of the rules that create mechanisms of social stratification. They sought to emphasise the complex nature of the problem and the interdependencies of many factors that lead to it and hinder its elimination (e.g. limited access to goods and services, lack of political powers, health status, political and economic solutions).<sup>54</sup> Research on media discourse (not only in Poland) indicates that the media tend to focus on the manifestations and phenomena accompanying poverty, not on its objective causes, which makes socioeconomic inequalities and class issues almost invisible in the media. Mass media coverage of poverty and the poor generally lacks a description of the broader social context and structural analysis, lacking discussion of socioeconomic causes and factors contributing to impoverishment. In this sense, indigence often appears in the mass media as a phenomenon of unknown origin. The presentation of important structural causes could help the public better understand the causes of poverty and its sustainability.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusions

Analysis of research on the discourse of poverty in the mass media in Poland showed that there is no single discourse on this issue and way of presenting those affected by it. However, two dominant types of narratives can be demonstrated. The first is the discourse on the randomness of poverty, showing its causes in chance events, such as illness, disability, and external factors. The poor deserve

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<sup>51</sup> A. Duda, *Medialne reprezentacje biedy...*, p. 16.

<sup>52</sup> M. Lisowska-Magdziarz, *Reprezentacje biedy...*, pp. 38–39.

<sup>53</sup> Eadem, *Ubóstwo jako problem estetyczny...*, p. 62.

<sup>54</sup> A. Duda, *Medialne reprezentacje biedy...*, pp. 18, 34.

<sup>55</sup> J. Lugo-Ocando, *Poverty in the News Media...*, p. 1, 5.

sympathy, solidarity, support, and even help from audiences or fellow citizens in this way of presentation. The problem is discussed in the context of individual tragedies and charity without showing its complex character and entanglement in the structural conditions of power, inequality, and dependence on social, economic, and political mechanisms.

The second way of presenting people experiencing poverty is to refer to cultural and individualistic interpretations, which see the sources of this problem in the personal characteristics of individuals, their attitudes, deviant behaviours, poor life choices, and the specific culture of poor people, which do not allow them to succeed and break away from deprivation. Poverty is a by-product of individual characteristics and choices, which have little to do with the rest of society's structural problems. It imposes individual responsibility for one's economic status on those affected by poverty. Therefore, the destitute do not deserve support and help but should be subjected to control and supervision to change their bad habits.

The characteristics of people who are poor in media coverage are also their "otherness" and "alienation," i.e. belonging to a subordinate social category not included in the "mainstream" society.<sup>56</sup> The situation in which impoverished people constantly face a negative message about them causes the experience of poverty to have a stigmatising character and hinders normal (according to social expectations and views) functioning.<sup>57</sup> Media discourse, on the one hand, shapes and, on the other hand, propagates social images of poverty and the poor, reinforcing their power.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, the fight against the broadly understood social exclusion of the less fortunate should manifest itself in combating the negative perception and presentation of impoverished people also in the media discourse.<sup>59</sup> The way in which indigence and people affected by it are talked about or written about in the mass media affects the way they are treated on a daily basis by fellow citizens and the way in which this problem is solved at the level of strategies in social policy.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibidem, p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> R. Lister, *Bieda...*, pp. 125–129.

<sup>58</sup> D. Lepianka, *Images of Poverty in a Selection of the Polish Daily Press*, "Current Sociology" 2015, vol. 63, no. 7, p. 9.

<sup>59</sup> W. Kozek, *Koncepcje walki z biedą jako podstawa analizy*, in: *Utrzymać się na powierzchni. O walce z biedą w pięciu krajach europejskich w perspektywie indywidualnego sprawstwa*, eds. W. Kozek, J. Kubisa, M. Zielińska, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warsaw 2017, pp. 48–49.

<sup>60</sup> M. Kostecki, *Pokoleniowo reprodukowana odmienność kulturowa w dyskursie...*, p. 342.

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