

Špela Razpotnik & Bojan Dekleva (2007)

On the street: homeless people talk about themselves and others talk about them.
(Na cesti – brezdomci o sebi in drugi o njih)

Ljubljana: Pedagoška fakulteta, pp. 201.

In Slovenia the issue of homelessness is under-researched, which may be linked in part to the almost non-existent nature of the problem prior to the collapse of socialism. Homelessness is now becoming a more evident problem in Slovenia, but it is only slowly becoming a more prominent feature of research and policy discussions. This book from Razpotnik and Dekleva presents the results of one of the few research projects undertaken on the issue of homelessness in Slovenia and therefore warrants special attention. It is very much welcome and even necessary, in order to start a broader discussion of this issue. The book has been published almost at the same time as another volume by the same authors, Dekleva and Razpotnik (2007): *Homelessness in Ljubljana*. These books are best read together as, in combination, they form a more complete whole, with one book presenting the field research on reasons for homelessness and the scale of the problem in Ljubljana, while the other, which is the focus of this review, concentrates on discourses of homelessness in Slovene society. Together, they represent an important addition to current knowledge about homelessness in Slovenia.

This book – *On the street: homeless people talk about themselves and others talk about them* – has four main sub-themes which present various points of view on the homeless and which allow the reader to compare a variety of perspectives. Firstly, the view of the homeless themselves is presented; secondly, media presentations of homelessness are discussed; thirdly, the perception of homeless people amongst the general public is analysed; and fourthly, the view presented in the street newspaper – ‘*Kralji ulice*’ (Kings of the streets) – is considered.

Indicative of the prominent role that homeless people are given in the book, is that it starts with their perceptions. This makes clear the attitude of both authors – they try to give voice to homeless people as much as possible in order to bring them out of the passive role that they are often allocated in dominant discourses. It emancipates their views, giving them the same weight as other views and discourses on

homelessness that are presented in the book. The views of the homeless are presented through ten case studies; stories of homelessness gathered from different sources, including fieldwork, interviews and self-presentations (autobiographies) of homeless people. The life stories of the homeless paint a very diverse picture of pathways into homelessness and, in some cases, pathways out of homelessness. This part of the book is very narrative-based, and involves the reader personally in the life stories of the homeless.

The second part of the book presents the media presentations of the homeless. Articles taken from several newspapers over a period of one year are analysed. This analysis shows how the media discourse most often starts from the position of 'us against them', and that in a large majority of the articles there is a negative social categorisation (i.e. negative stereotyping) of homeless people presented (in almost two thirds of the articles).

The third part of the book is characterised as public perceptions of homelessness, and is an analysis of a meeting that the authors (as experts in the field of homelessness and active members of organisation helping the homeless) had with 'concerned' members of the local community in Ljubljana. It was undertaken with a specific group of people – members of a local community who wanted to talk with experts about the increasing problem of homelessness in their area – and therefore doesn't represent a general public view. However, it makes an interesting case study as it shows some of the very common conceptions, prejudices and attitudes of the public when dealing with the homeless. The major issues that arose were: feelings of guilt when faced with a homeless person; the 'otherness' of homelessness; and the distinction drawn between the 'really homeless' and 'not-really homeless' people seen on the street (with drunks, beggars and so on. considered as being the 'not-really homeless').

The last part of the book is an analysis of the street newspaper – Kings of the street (*Kralji Ulice*). The authors present the newspaper, analyse its role in Slovenia and look at how it presents the homeless. This could be described as a self-evaluation, as the authors are the main founders of the newspaper. The main goal of this part of the analysis was to find out how much voice is given to the homeless in the Slovene street newspaper. The authors go on to make a comparison with some of the street papers abroad (in USA, UK, France, and The Netherlands). This analysis shows that the Slovenian street newspaper extensively covers issues linked with homelessness and that it also enables the active role of homeless people as authors, which is rarely the case in other street newspapers.

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This book is a collage of different perspectives and it provides a wide variety of information. What would be welcome yet is perhaps missing for the reader is a final conclusion that links the various discourses analysed in the book. The authors present a complex understanding of the homelessness issue in Slovenia and also give voice to homeless people; they are critical of various discourses, pointing out our (sometimes unconsciously) prejudiced views, challenging the reader to take a more active stand. It presents a very relevant piece of research in a field that is desperately under-researched.

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