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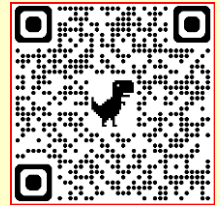
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## The role of the sociologist in universal design

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of the paper is to pay particular attention to the supporting role of a sociologist in the field of universal design. The issues that will be discussed revolve around presenting a sociologist as a researcher and observer of social phenomena, where the listeners' attention will be drawn to the features as well as competences that facilitate the sociologist's work in the field of universal design – adapting space to a wide range of recipients, taking into account all their needs.*

*The next part will show the pragmatic aspect of using sociological analyzes (collected data) to indicate new social phenomena or predict (the occurrence of probabilities) new social processes taking place today. With reference to the previous thought, the basic tools and methods used in sociology will also be presented, which can be an excellent source of valuable information on the verification of the needs and desires of citizens of a specific territory, with particular emphasis on how to secure them in Social Responsible Design (SRD). The aim of this design is to prepare space or useful objects in such a way that everyone can feel comfortable.*

*Therefore, it seems interesting to present qualitative and quantitative methods in analyzes used in universal design, as well as to outline combined methods. The speaker will try to answer the question that bothers design sociologists: Can all research tools and techniques available in sociology be successfully implemented in the analysis of people with special needs*

**KEY WORDS:** universal design, research methods, techniques and tools in sociology, sociologist of design, sociologist in design.

## 1. Introduction

Universal design, as the name suggests, is the adaptation of space to a wide range of recipients, taking into account all their needs, including people with physical, intellectual and related disabilities – i.e. ailments that prevent the fulfillment of basic needs and the comfort of using private and public space typical of a human person. At this point, we should also take into account healthy people with full vitality, who, due to temporary limitations or inability to perform certain activities, should be provided with a comfortable life.

Designers and architects ensure that public buildings and public places take into account universal assumptions for the implementation of architectural projects, trying to adapt them to the needs of their users. Matching these objects taking into account all groups of recipients may prove to be a challenge for the architect, because he must take into account many variables (socio-demographic characteristics) of recipients, which are indispensable for designing. The aim of this paper is to draw attention to the role of a sociologist in the field of universal design and the practical application of its features and analyses. A question may be asked at this point? What is the role of a sociologist in universal design? Can it hinder or help a wide group of recipients meet their needs? What research tools and techniques available in sociology can be successfully implemented in the analysis of people with special needs in accordance with the principle of homocentrism?

As the old saying goes, "the further into the forest, the more trees", hence proper discernment reveals the burning problem of several million Poles. Between the 2011 census and the one conducted recently in 2021, there is a noticeable decrease in Poland's population by 1,025,238 people, or 2.7%. The percentage of Poles living in rural areas also increased – from 39.2 in 2011 to 40.1 percent. in 2021 [8]. Every fifth Pole is over 60 years old. Within one decade, the percentage of individuals at pre-working age (0-17 years) decreased from 18.8 in 2011 to 18.3 percent. in 2021. There was also a decrease in the share of people of working age (18-59/64 years) from 64.1 to 58.9 percent. – this means a loss of over 2.5 million people from this group [8]. Indicating the actual state of contemporary Polish society and proper analyzes in this area is the main task of sociologists. Sociologists are assessed differently in society. Opinions regarding this group of people and the scientific discipline are divided. Some people consider detailed analyzes and "sticking a stick into an anthill" unnecessary, while others see it as the essence of explaining the current situation and possibly indicating the direction of changes taking place in communities. Sociologists see, observe, analyze, reflect and indicate possible directions of changes in all areas of our lives – including universal design and Corporate Social Responsibility.

## 2. Who is a sociologist?

According to the Sociological Dictionary, sociology is a social science that aims to study and describe various societies and human groups [3]. The basic subjects of sociological analyzes include, among others, processes and phenomena occurring within social reality – all manifestations and forms of social life, social structures, communities and systems of social interactions [7]. The subject of sociology research is therefore broad, as Piotr Sztompka says, from the analysis of a fleeting meeting on the street through research on global social processes [10]. In turn, a sociologist is a thoroughly educated specialist in the theory, methods and techniques of examining social rules, processes and all changes taking place in the

social structure. Sociology is a "new science on an old topic" that tries to answer key questions: How did this world come to be? Why are our living conditions so different from those in which our parents and grandparents lived? What will be the direction of change? [2]. A sociologist is a person who develops sociological imagination while studying. Sociological imagination is the ability to link everything that happens in society with structural, cultural and historical conditions as well as the subjective actions of people [10]. It allows us to see how many events that seem to concern only an individual actually reflect broader issues, allowing us to distance ourselves from our everyday, routine activities and look at them in a new way. The development of sociology can contribute to social criticism and practical social reform. Just better understanding given social circumstances allows us to better control them. At the same time, sociology offers the opportunity to develop cultural sensitivity. In practical terms, sociologists study the effects of implementing specific social programs. Sociology provides the opportunity for self-knowledge and, consequently, increases the possibilities of changing the conditions of one's own life [2]. In a sense, everyone is a sociologist, but not everyone is an academic or scientific sociologist who, when properly prepared, is able to make an in-depth analysis of a specific state of social reality. This is the difference between a qualified sociologist and a socially sensitive person who likes to observe the world.

## 3. What should a sociologist be like?

This is a difficult question that cannot be answered clearly. However, a sociologist is a person who likes people and being with them through conversations, contact, and observations conditioned by the irresistible temptation to learn about reality. Each day of researching reality is a challenge for a sociologist, not a problem. A sociologist is a person who should have a compendium of various competences, both social and personal. Personal competences that a sociologist should have are primarily a personal set of knowledge, certain skills and experiences related to personality, but also understanding, feeling and motivation to act. In this case, he should be reliable, persistent, and committed to taking on new tasks with creativity and self-confidence. The desired personal competence in this case is independence, determination, flexibility, and readiness to learn. However, social competences constitute a set of skills and knowledge that determine the functioning of a sociologist in various professional situations. This includes establishing contacts, building relationships, creating social bonds, working in a team, taking actions leading to a common goal, taking into account knowledge and respect of other cultures. The ability to resolve conflicts, organizational skills, the ability to plan and obtain important information, and the ability to negotiate are social competences that are important in the work of a sociologist [6].

## 4. The role of the sociologist in universal design

In their analyses, sociologists use various methods as consciously applied methods of conduct that aim to achieve a specific goal in given conditions. The methods use various research techniques as detailed ways of performing a given type of research tasks, for example, the survey method can be implemented using the technique of a press survey, a postal survey, a telephone survey or an online survey. The initial task in the conducted research is the appropriate conceptualization of the research project, then operationalization of the research, selection of the research sample and its representativeness or exclusion of representativeness (in some cases it is difficult to calculate representativeness, or it is impossible due

to uncertain estimates, e.g. migration, homelessness, hidden unemployment, or behavioral addictions). Research approaches are divided into qualitative and quantitative [12]. The most frequently used methods of scientific research are: observational method, experimental method, statistical method, case analysis method, source criticism, intuitive method and critical analysis. There are many varieties of them, and many scientific studies involve a combination of several of them [11]. The most frequently used methods of sociological research are the observational method, the experimental method, the statistical method, the case analysis method, source criticism and critical analysis [4].

The role of a sociologist is not limited to the careful, literal use of research techniques and tools, but to their proper implementation. A sociologist is able to interpret statistical data – draw appropriate conclusions based on them and conduct further analyses. What seems interesting in this aspect is the different use of four basic research techniques: observation, text analysis, interview or survey technique, taking into account such aspects as designing spaces for people with special needs. The observation technique in quantitative research involves initial activities, e.g. to prepare an appropriate questionnaire. However, in qualitative research it is the basis for understanding another culture, including the local culture, and human behavior based on social ties and relationships. In the case of an interview and a quantitative approach, it can be implemented in a survey conducted most often on a random sample or numerous samples using closed questions, while in qualitative research an interview consisting of open questions is conducted with a small number of people [5]. Thanks to this, it will allow for a completely different approach to the phenomenon under study and drawing completely different conclusions. In an auditorium survey, the researcher does not see human behavior, his reaction to questions, mood swings, changes in tone or tone of voice in the case of intimate or difficult questions. By writing down previously recorded content, the interviewer can draw many more conclusions from them than from statistical analysis of the data. An example may be the renovation of the park in District X.

By asking questions in a survey, e.g. an online one, you obtain information about the renovation, social acceptance or possibly opinions about the infrastructure in the park, where everyone enters what they really think is right. In the case of interviews with various social groups, carried out in that park, more is noticed: why such and not another bench, why in this and not another place (light, street, shadow, proximity to the toilet). A sociologist can also point out. What semantic key should be used during research with people in crisis of homelessness, people with intellectual or physical disabilities. Why? Because it can indicate the sources, causes and effects of these social phenomena, and thus, colloquially speaking, communicate with the person you are actually talking to. An interesting example is people in a homelessness crisis. By asking: What are the main causes of this homelessness? There is a social belief that it is mainly alcohol. Alcohol is an effect. The direct causes are most often heartbreak, wounded hearts and life traumas that push people to seek solace in alcohol. Therefore, it is important how the question is asked and the attitude of the researcher to the researched. In order to capture the universal aspect of designing common spaces for people with disabilities, a statistical calculation of certain needs may prove to be insufficient. Careful observation is then necessary (e.g. case analysis of the needs of an elderly person, a pregnant person, a mother with children) to recognize (on-site visit) how to meet these needs. On this basis, the conclusions obtained should be considered by the architect. Another technique worth mentioning is text analysis. In research, this applies to content

analysis, e.g. counting various conceptual categories created by researchers (categorization key), which may turn out to be unsatisfactory in design research. In the case of qualitative research, it is about understanding the research category, i.e. understanding the method of conduct – the researched group may be people with special needs. And in this case, the researcher tries to point out the needs as well as understand the meaning of securing these needs and meeting them head on. A hypothetical example is the construction of parking spaces and pedestrian crossings. They are used by everyone: healthy, physically and intellectually fit, but also pregnant women, the elderly, people with injuries, missing limbs, mothers with baby strollers or those traveling with heavy suitcases. Will everyone be guaranteed safety, health protection, lack of stress and comfort? This question should be asked to the designers of pedestrian routes at railway stations, bus stops or shopping malls, etc. A sociologist will go to a selected place and start observing people walking there – he will draw conclusions very quickly. The architect will sit down with the cartographic and technical documentation, prepare a report and draw a project on the drawing board, regardless of whether there will be room for a walker for elderly Mrs. Kryisia going to buy fresh bread, or whether Mrs. Kasia with two children and a double stroller will be able to pass freely or someone hurrying to catch the train. a young, tall man running with two travel suitcases and a hat on his head.

In qualitative research, what matters is the content of the respondent's statement, the way he or she speaks, pauses, emotions, body language and an enthusiastic or reluctant approach to research. All this to understand the meaning of what people say. And here we should pay attention to the way people speak, indicating their internal needs, but also desires. There is a distinction between needs and desires. A need is something indispensable without which a person could not function. Desire is a psychologically created element, the lack of which does not disturb human functioning. A researcher, properly prepared and observing a social phenomenon, can, by analyzing words, select the appropriate way of speaking in order to understand the subject and approach him or her in a holistic way. An experienced researcher knows not to use words that are not acceptable to the subject, e.g. in the case of people with disabilities, they do not feel sorry for them, do not show sympathy, do not feel sorry for them, because people with physical disabilities cannot stand it, just like the blind or deaf.

## 5. Summary

In universal design, it is worth taking into account technical, legal and social aspects. The ideal situation would be for an architect, a lawyer and a sociologist or social worker to sit at the table. Each of these people brings a lot to the building, a common and comfortable space that is friendly not only here and now, but also in the future.

As Jacek Szmatka says, emergency sociological structuralism puts forward the theses about the occurrence of emergent properties at particular levels of integration of the social world. Emergencyness, i.e. the qualitative diversity of social phenomena, is manifested in the existence of certain areas of social reality, called levels, which are characterized by relative internal homogeneity, but which differ qualitatively from each other. There is no smooth transition or ownership between these levels. They are characterized by an important qualitative difference, a kind of qualitative autonomy. Therefore, reality is a reality characterized by discontinuity of properties and hence a multi-level reality [9]. A perfect example of this type of incident is a situation in which an elderly person is sitting on a park bench. We can assume that she is resting, enjoying the sun, maybe she is feeling bad, or maybe she is just waiting for

someone? Maybe this person appears as an individual in a crisis of homelessness or waiting for interest from others (affiliation)? Another example illustrating the emergency multi-level world is the situation of securing the basic life needs of pregnant women. It might seem that this is a very obvious situation. A pregnant woman, in addition to park benches, barriers to support her descent or ascent of stairs, also needs other elements of her life, for example a place to change diapers or proximity to a toilet, comfort, appropriate stair steps, and elevators.

A sociologist discovers the world more holistically, looks at it as a whole, because he sees what situations may influence the over-interpretation of certain phenomena, but on the other hand he also notices some properties that are generally overlooked.

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