

**Tadeusz Aleksander**

Wszechnica Polska, University in Warsaw

**Agnieszka Dragon (2018). *Transformacja  
doświadczeń życiowych uczestników mediacji*  
[*Transformation of Life Experiences in Mediation  
Participants*]. Kraków: Oficyna Wydawnicza  
„Impuls”. pp. 203**

Despite its multithreaded content (elements of law, psychology and management theory), the monograph of Agnieszka Dragon is a theoretical work that belongs to social pedagogy and counseling. It focuses on the course and educational effects of mediation, defined as an arranged intentional social situation that is supposed to settle a dispute between its participants. The Author describes the process of resolving the dispute as – on the one hand – a strategy of rationalizing social life (i.e. resolving a conflict), and on the other hand – a way to broaden knowledge and enrich (or transform) the life experiences of the mediated dispute participants. The original character and value of this dissertation manifests in its Author unequivocally broadening and deepening the reflection carried out by social pedagogy scholars by pondering the educational and agentive meaning of another social process, namely mediation proceedings, introduced in Polish criminal law in 1998. Until the publication of this work, the national publications on this subject were few and far between, fragmentary and usually based on simplified quantitative research. Being aware of this, the Author of the book approached mediation from the perspective of a “qualitative researcher”. She studied the course of mediation, the behaviour of the participants in the dispute, the role of the mediator (as a social worker), and above all, the transformations and changes in the experiences of the mediation participants. This original approach, expressed in the choice of the subject and the broad scope of the dissertation, should be praised. It is worth noting that the model of a counselling process which the Author described in detail, served as an inspiration for research and description of the mediation process, its effects and some of its more elusive conditions. As a result, this approach facilitated a holistic overview mediation as a social activity and contributed to smooth “incorporation” of the

Author's knowledge about the agentive effects of mediation into wider areas of reflection and pedagogical practice.

It was all the more possible since the Author conducted thorough and long-term research prior to writing the book. The research consisted in a careful analysis of the relevant literature, and specifically, the publications that included descriptions of mediation as an organized process of interpersonal interaction, as well as major scientific publications on the theory and practice of counseling, which the Author took as the basis for her analysis of the mediation phenomenon. The vast scope of this preliminary research is evidenced in the content of the dissertation and the specific references to scientific literature, as well as the extensive (11 pages) multilingual bibliography, placed at the end of the book. The Author also devoted time and effort to the analysis of legal documents containing information about the essence, qualifying circumstances, the course and principles of proper organization of mediation in disputes. She also studied the files of the district court (analysis of 96 cases referred there for mediation in 2002–2006) in the city where she conducted her research. While collecting material for her study, Agnieszka Dragon also interviewed participants ("parties") of past mediation processes, and persons acting as mediators. These were clearly in-depth interviews, and the Author-interviewer investigated the course of (selected 10) mediation cases and their effects, which manifested in transformations of participants' life experiences, as well as their conditioning. It is worth noting that while preparing for this work, the Author also used her own extensive experience as a court mediator. In a sense, the research she conducted was in line with the much tested and popular strategy of long-term research. The material gathered during the course of this research has provided a sound and reliable basis for writing the dissertation reviewed here. Its high quality and truthfulness definitely had a positive impact on the quality of the outcome.

All these efforts resulted in a rich content of the book. With clarity, the Author presents several important issues that have so far been largely neglected in social sciences, including social pedagogy. The first one is the essence and the assumed functions of mediation as an element of implementing restorative justice, a way of amicable settlement of disputes, a deliberately arranged social process with great creative (educational) potential for the people involved, a transformative process impacting previous life experiences of the participants. The second of these issues is an interesting and appropriately edited description of the style and basic elements of the mediator's work (the structure of activities, stages and organization of work). These elements are shown against the background of the postulated personality of the mediator as a social worker (pedagogue). The third issue – presented in an equally thorough and scientific way – is the characterization, through description of the course and numerous conditions, of the contemporary mediation process, followed by its social functions and effects. Agnieszka Dragon sees the effects of mediation in the ongoing changes in the attitude to life, i.e. the transformation of life experiences of its participants. She also indicates that these are conditioned by

many factors, mainly by the type of approach to mediation adopted by the participants (active enthusiast, sober player, absolute protester, total conformist), but also partly dependent on the mediation talent and professional qualification of the mediator. The value of the work is enhanced by numerous quotes from respondents, which confirm both the arguments and generalizations put forward by the Author. Thanks to such arrangement of the dissertation, the Author can draw clear conclusions, pointing to the necessity to ensure thorough training of mediators, who may significantly contribute to rationalization of social life in many areas, including the judiciary (e.g. reducing the need for lengthy and socially harmful court proceedings in minor cases).

The substantive contribution of this dissertation should be seen in two areas. The first one is social pedagogy and counseling, as mentioned above. The Author clearly demonstrates that mediation, as an intentional and generally complex social interaction, affects the change of mutual attitudes of its participants. Next, she describes to what extent the situation created in the course of mediation, 'theatrical' and usually strongly emotional, transforms the awareness of the participants, which results in the transformation of their behaviour (e.g. reconciliation of the parties and consolidation of good relations between them). She presents negotiations as a form of assisting people in disputes, and at the same time as an effective way of learning (participants get to know the essence of the dispute and course of negotiations, the needs and interests of the parties, as well as motives of their opponents). The Author also presents numerous determinants of these effects, resulting from e.g. personality type. Active enthusiasts tend to relatively easily reach an agreement and transform behaviour in accordance with the wishes and intentions of the mediator. In personality types such as the absolute protester and the total conformist, the effects of mediation are usually negligible. Presentation of long-term effects of mediation, studied years later (long-term research) after the interaction took place, constitute a novel contribution, not yet described by the educators, which makes Agnieszka Dragon's publication highly valuable among the books on social pedagogy and counseling.

The dissertation also makes valuable contribution to the area of profession-related research. The Author demonstrates the conditions, methodology and organization of the mediator's work, the effects of his or her activities and their background. The book presents the mediator as an employee providing help and advice to people who are at odds with each other, a person that needs to be thoroughly prepared for this function, learning continuously through mediation practice and perfecting his or her skills by reflecting on this activity and numerous determinants of its effects. Thus, the Author contributes new knowledge necessary to draw up a detailed description of the profession and the work done by mediators. Through thorough scientific exploration, she verifies the methodology of personality research and the specificity of the work performed by professional mediators. The qualities mentioned above: methodological, substantive and applicable aspects of

the work, should encourage readers to carefully read Agnieszka Dragon's book. Even non-professional readers may discover many secrets of the mediation work, and thus develop a positive attitude towards the representatives of this profession and their complex area of activity. Careful reading of the dissertation will also surely contribute new knowledge to the expertise of social pedagogues and judicial staff involved in organizing mediation processes. It will also support theoreticians and practitioners of continuous education and training, as the Author argues that it is necessary and suggests strategies for improving mediators' skills as social workers. Such an improvement, according to the Author, is a way to achieve excellence and to improve employee effectiveness.

In conclusion, we can add that the book by Agnieszka Dragon is written in an engaging way, presented in a solid logical structure in an appropriate language register. All in all, it provides ample evidence that it was written by an intellectually mature person with great scientific talents and passion for writing.

*Translated by Katarzyna Byłów-Antkowiak*