

EMPOWERING INTERVENTIONS IN THE COURSE OF A SOCIALLY ENGAGED RESEARCH. AN EXAMPLE OF PARTICIPATORY STUDY ON YOUTH FROM AN UNPRIVILEGED NEIGHBORHOOD IN ŁÓDŹ

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The author presents the dimensions of empowering interventions taken up in the course of a socially engaged participatory study on the example of a study she conducted among a group of youngsters from one of the unprivileged neighborhoods in Łódź. Even though her interventions in the actors' lives were spontaneous, they allowed to draw some conclusions on their aims and action orientations, and hence to outline the empowering actions variants in a socially engaged research .

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INTRODUCTION

The paper comprises a presentation of the results of my critical reflection upon empowering social change in the course of a participatory study on the example of a three-year study I conducted among a group of youngsters from one of the unprivileged Łódź neighborhoods. The reason for the reflection was two-fold. First of all, I'm still in a less or more direct and engaged relation with a few of the research actors, which throws a different light on the alleged short- and long-term research side-back effects². Second of all, the impression of the commonly shared image of unquestionable legitimacy of participatory research as a tool for empowering social change in case of the unprivileged research actors, together with bitter conclusions drawn from the spontaneous but somehow post-research observations, raised a set of doubts.

Sharing them with the Readers of this contribution will demand in the first place a presentation of the outline of the research procedure and the research context as well as its theoretical results. Apart from that, reflection on the nature of empowerment in terms of the theory underlying the research analysis seemed to be equally essential to be discussed. I assumed that the same ontological perspective as that one incorporated in the research procedure is needed to analyze the effect of actions of the participatory researcher interacting with the actors of the examined world. Then, I am going to demonstrate some examples of empowering actions taken up in the course of the research, which will make the basis for reflection upon their ambiguous character.

² The research was not planned as an action research scheme, meaning that the research including strategic social interventions is planned in advance i.e. in the phase of research concept development. Hence, the researcher's action aiming at social change in the world of the examined persons was taken up rather as something inevitable, where the point of relevance for defining the contextual inevitability and assuming by me different social roles – in addition to the role of a researcher – was the need expressed by the individual actors or the necessity of action seen from the perspective of me – an engaged researcher – social pedagogue. The today's perspectives on what was necessary and what was not seems to be different, which is actually the key reason for the reflection developed in this contribution.

RESEARCH OUTLINE³

The research underpinning this reflection was a three-year participatory observation of the youth from an unprivileged Łódź neighborhood. The theoretical grounds of the research are constituted by symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1954). The logic of the research procedure was planned with respect to the grounded theory method (Glaser, Strauss, 1967). However, the identity of the researcher – a social pedagogue – seemed to openly modify the indications of the specified research method. Social pedagogy, as a scientific and practical discipline, instructs the students to see the social world in social-pedagogical problem categories (Marynowicz-Hetka, 1998). Therefore, fulfilling the role of social philosophy, it shapes researcher's social sensitivity and imagination, which in turn determines the way social problems are perceived by him or her and – what is most important – it justifies the conviction of the need to influence the change in the researched social world. The old tradition of combining research and action – not only in everyday pedagogue-practitioner diagnostic activities, but also on the level of scientific research, naturally has made me a researcher who cannot be just an observer. Researcher's engagement in the dynamics of the studied actors' daily experiences seems to result in a certain type of participation in the research – engaged participation.

The neighborhood under the research is situated within a quarter of four streets in the center of Łódź and is recognized by Łódź inhabitants as impoverished and dangerous. 19th-century houses, with gates leading to dark courtyards, constitute the architecture of the neighborhood. The courtyards resemble a decayed labyrinth of corridors linked with one another, allowing the inhabitants to avoid any contact with the outer world, simultaneously acting as a factor contributing to interior integration. None of these courtyards has a designated place for children or youth. Yet, each of them plays the

³ More about the interactionally-oriented theory of social exclusion of the youth from the unprivileged Łódź neighborhood in Gulczyńska 2006.

role of a meeting point for mothers taking care of their children, the unemployed adults, and older children who socially share this space in their daily routine. The gates – as a buffer space between the neighborhood and the outer world – are occupied by groups of youth (Gulczyńska, 2007).

In such territorial and social context, participative observation led from the perspective of a group of youngsters was conducted. The main actors of the observation were six boys – my neighbors – aged 14-22. My frequent contact with them in our common place of residence (neighborhood) was a direct inspiration for this study. As the research process advanced, I became engaged in different roles – a neighbor, a friend of the family, a street educator, a curator of a photographic exhibition presenting their photos of the neighborhood, an ‘advocate’ of the boys representing them in formal institutions, and finally a legal custodian of one of them. The borders of the world under the research expanded. I saw the actors in other contexts, which let me reconstruct the symbolic boundaries of the world they participate in. I worked towards reconstructing the patterns of their interactions inside their own group, and between them and other neighbors as well as other interactional partners – police, schools, the court and representatives of social-educational institutions.

The process of my engaged participation, accompanied by systematic registration of data and its simultaneous analysis, allowed me to work out a theory on interactional tactics of the social exclusion process of the youth from the unprivileged neighborhood in the logic of the actors’ rationalization.

The social exclusion process reconstruction simultaneously revealed the spheres of youth disempowerment that made it possible to understand the nature of the empowering actions taken up in the research context. To define the areas of disempowerment and empowering actions undertaken by the socially engaged researcher, we need to outline the concept of empowerment constructed in the course of engaged research and presented in this paper.

THE NATURE OF EMPOWERMENT IN THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

The concept of empowerment takes on different forms in the literature. It has noun-like and verb-like connotations depending on what we are talking about – the aim of empowering actions or the actions themselves (Szmagalski, 1996). We might encounter various theoretical backgrounds underpinning empowerment, which reveals a much more important differentiation level of its conceptual frames, where references to self-help support group traditions and radical thought in social work have a pivotal meaning. The former discourse is comprised within my scope of interest.

Since my interactionally-oriented research showed areas of its subjects' disempowerment and brought about my interventions, whose empowering orientation I realized in the follow-up reflection, considerations on the results of these interventions require providing the outline of the empowerment concept from the theoretical perspective incorporated in the research. Reconceptualization of the empowerment concept needed first of all a display of the dimensions of power as the significant context revealed in research actors' interactions. This is what allowed me to attempt to abstract the concept of empowerment consistently with symbolic interactionism assumptions.

POWER DIMENSIONS IN THE PRESENTED RESEARCH

The study showed two dimensions of power revealing in daily communication of the 'research actors', i.e. *formal and symbolic*.

Formal power over the youth in the context of the neighborhood can be understood exclusively in relation to the differences in the perception of the significance of the neighborhood in the lives of its inhabitants.

On this basis, we can talk about two categories of neighbors: the participants and the non-participants.

The vast majority of the neighborhood community is composed of the first ones. This place is a space socially, and often also biographically,

significant for them, in which they spend their free time among people who are alike, and with which they identify themselves. The matter of the neighborhood is crucial for the quality of social activities performed by them, especially the activity conducted by children and young people, who based on the law of "social usucaption" try to change it according to their expectations. There they encounter the resistance of physical matter. 19th-century architectural concepts did not provide for the transfer of social life from the living room to the area of backyards, so the latter do not easily lend themselves to adaptive actions of those who spend there a significant part of their life. The resistance of the matter is intensified by social resistance. This is due to the fact that another category of residents is formed by the non-participants who treat the neighborhood only as an area of physical communication (a part of the way to work or commercial places), a place where cars can be parked, or things can be stored (cells). They do not initiate personal interactions there, but only the ones related to things. The difference in the meaning attributed to the space does not translate to the symmetry of power in terms of influencing it, because the decisions concerning the changes in the infrastructure of the neighborhood are taken by the residential community, and its members are landlords, not tenants paying the rent. A huge part of the landlords are non-participants. Formal decisions about the changes in the neighborhood are therefore made by those for whom it is socially irrelevant, and who are in a privileged position in this regard. The difference in the meanings attributed to the space of the neighborhood translates into a difference regarding the expectations towards it, which becomes a significant factor for the quality of interactions between the residents, including the interactions involving representatives of the young generation.

Understanding the dynamics and variants of the course of these interactions requires defining the differences on the symbolic level of analysis, as the division of the residents according to the criterion of the significance of the material sphere of the neighborhood seems to reveal more important differences between them: differences at the level of meanings and senses underlying their actions not just in the context of the neighborhood.

The analysis of the formal areas of youth disempowerment must be extended to include the analysis of interactions between the participants and non-participants in the categories of the concept of "social world" by Anselm Strauss (Strauss A., 1969) where the social world is a social entity consisting of people connected by communication, which constitutes a particular universe of discourse. Social worlds are "those groupings of individuals bound together by networks of communication or universes of discourse and who share perspectives on reality" (Lindesmith, Strauss and Denzin: 1975, p. 439-440). They include groups of primary normative reference which share with an individual the same socially negotiated perspective on reality. The unprivileged neighborhood is understood as a social construction that is in the process of continuous creation through interactions among its inhabitants representing two social worlds. What is shared by the representatives of the particular social world is the perspective on the reality, because in their interactions among themselves and others they refer to the same symbolic structure. The symbolic structure is a set of categories according to which a group of people interpret facts from their environment. These categories express the intersubjectively negotiated meanings ascribed to particular elements of the environment. The important parts of symbolic structures are the models of social identities, which serve as reference points in interactions with others. Social identity consists of a set of attitudes that we may have towards people. When we interact with someone, we anticipate his category and attributes, and we transform these anticipations into normative expectations (Goffman, 1979). The type of social identity, which a person tries to negotiate, is the basis for his or her social status in the context defined through the specifics of the symbolic structure.

From the perspective of my research, the main actors, namely the neighborhood residents, are defined as representatives of two social worlds. The criterion allowing me to draw the line between them seems to be the *dissimilarity of the presented actors' social identity*. And so, the symbolic layer of the neighborhood took on the form of a dualistic structure, consisting of the *"world of fellows"* and the *"world of strangers"*, representing contradictory values and meanings expressed

in social action. The symbolic structure, to which the representatives of both worlds refer to, is different, which results in the specificity of the interactions occurring between them (Gulczyńska, 2007b). The reconstruction of meanings and senses characteristic for the “world of strangers”, based on the research data, lets us consider its participants to be the ones who represent a specific *formal social order* – the order of the dominant culture, while the “world of fellows” consists of the *“enemies of losers and the Police”*.

The affiliation of the actors does not depend on their age or sex, but on the reference to the intersubjectively negotiated symbolic structure in the interactions among the neighbors. The simplicity of this structure is expressed in two mainstream social identity models which the actors refer to in their interactions: “fighter’s identity” and “loser’s identity”.

The “fighter” is a type of person who struggles to be a winner, who enjoys respect and is able to defend himself or herself against degradation strategies applied by others. The “loser” lacks the competencies of defending himself or herself against degradation strategies and he or she withdraws from the field. The “fellows” interact among themselves and with “strangers” to become closer to a “fighter”, than to a “loser”. Consequent negotiating towards a “fighter’s” identity ensures respect, loyalty of others and high status that brings privileges in their social world, but also distorts communication with the representatives of the world of strangers. The latter is overburdened with conflicts, which is a very common trait of neighborhood material space distribution amongst the fellows and the strangers. The reconstruction of the logic of this process revealed the fellows as unprivileged. The difference between those two symbolic structures set as a reference point in communication enhances the inequality in symbolic power of the representatives of the two social worlds in the neighborhood.

Each society has different groups referring to different symbolic structures. The closer the symbolic structure shared by the group to the one of the dominant general society, the more powerful such group is. Symbolic power reveals privileges that the “strangers” have

over others in the process of exerting pressure to meet their needs. Since the members of that world refer to the symbolic structure that is in line with the dominant culture, their position speaks louder to the representatives of the institutions sustaining the status quo and having tools of control in the territory of the neighborhood.

The fact that the 'strangers' use communication patterns representative for the "culture of the majority" in conflict situations with the youth from the neighborhood makes the representatives of the younger generation "always guilty", which brings particular oppressive consequences to the latter. The neighborhood youth under the study interact with the representatives of both worlds, but the symbolic structure of the "world of fellows" is for them what we would call after Alfred Schütze the primary "relevance structure" that would always shape the course of social action in mixed contacts, including these in the neighborhood. Since the symbolic power belongs to those who represent the 'world of strangers', the process of neighborhood material space negotiation is disrupted by the *process of stigmatization*.

The term stigma refers to an attribute that is deeply discrediting in interactions when the behavior of a partner is not in line with the expectations of the other partner. When an attribute revealed in the interactions diverges from the expected image, it becomes a stigma – the effect of a special discrepancy between the virtual and the actual identity, "an undesired difference from what we had anticipated". Since that moment, interactions with a partner bearing a stigma are responses to his or her spoiled identity and both partners hold the same beliefs about this identity. A stigmatized individual may attempt to deal with the stigma in two ways – either with "hostile bravado" (attack) or/and by "defensive cowering" (withdrawal), which influences the course of interactions to the detriment of the stigmatized one.

Young fellows do not fulfill the expectations ascribed to them as children by a representative of the "strangers". They explore the neighborhood in the way which is unacceptable in the opinion of the "strangers". Further interactions among them take on the form of the exchange of correctional tactics by the strangers and hostile bravado and defensive cowering strategies of coping with the stigma on the

part of the children and youngsters. Conflict situations serve as a stage in the identity game because the main actor of each conflict is observed by the audience of fellows, which is meaningful to his or her status. Interactions of this kind put the youth in an unprivileged position due to their lack of negotiation skills, representative for the “world of strangers” – those of the dominant culture. The power of the privileged “strangers” manifests itself in different forms, be they: support from the local administration in forcing their decisions concerning the changes introduced in the neighborhood space, threatening the youth’s parents with bearing financial consequences, being communicatively more competent during police interventions, etc. Interactions with strangers in the neighborhood show the dominance of the cowering over hostile responses on the part of the youth, which leads – in time – to their social exclusion from the influence on the neighborhood and is indicated by their re-location to the areas of the gates – the spheres of no one.

As social worlds are entities whose perspectives are represented by people irrespective of the place and time, I went on in my research with a question on how interactions amongst the excluded youth and the representatives of the world of strangers proceed outside the scrutinized neighborhood. In time, I realized that the reconstruction of the process of social exclusion from the actors’ perspective brings the essence of this process to the gradual limitation of communication performed by the actors in subsequent objectively achieved contexts of the ‘world of strangers’, where the mechanism making this process dynamic would not be interpreted in terms of the individual fallbacks of the actors, but as a process of progressive exchange of social reactions to their ‘strangeness’ and their objectively deviant social responses. It is thus a process of exchange between the excluding reactions of the citizens belonging to the world of strangers and the self-excluding reactions of the representatives of the “world of fellows”, who paradoxically – protect in this very way the integrity of their identity and subjectivity.

The reconstructed process of social exclusion occurred to cover not only the stigmatizing tactics excluding young residents from the

influence on the material space of the neighborhood, but collaterally the tactics excluding them from school and other contexts culturally dominated by the subsequent (in terms of biographical order) “strangers”, be they teachers, school social workers, probation officers, educators of semi-open sociotherapeutic centers for the youth, correctional houses for juvenile delinquents, etc. They were excluded (disempowered) in the course of communication distorted by stigmatization whenever the context of communication occurred to be a socially mixed one in which the rules of interactional games were dominated by the logic of strangers and their formal power.

THE CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT FROM THE INTERACTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

If we define the social order of a small territorial community in terms of interactions and incorporate the concept of social world in the reconstruction of the logic of its social actors, the concept of power in the community seems to naturally refer to the dominance of one social world culture over another or others. It brings about consequences not only in the form of the dominance of one group in the decision-making process in the neighborhood, but also in the social conduct of individual actors. Hence, there are not only the empowered-disempowered social worlds as social entities that struggle for the space. Empowerment from the interactional point of view can be understood in individual terms, as the trait differentiating individual social careers where the process of social identity creation within particular social worlds is an issue.

Social identity creation goes together with social stratification within the social world. Hence, an actor acts to be defined in terms of these social identity “variants” (models) which give him the expected status (ascribed to the identity model). Being “empowered” means being able to influence your social picture the way you become whom you want (for the variants of social identities in the particular world) and get where you want (the status) in interactions with the representatives of this world. One might be highly empowered in one social world and simultaneously disempowered in another

(not knowing the interactive tools for getting a high status). This is the case of the course of my research actors' biographies. Being empowering in the "world of fellows" was consequently mirrored in the disturbed communication within the "world of strangers", whoever they appeared to be in their life. Individual social conduct in the contexts dominated by the culture of "the strangers" was overloaded with the conflict of expectations and endangered with the inconsistency of the social identity built up simultaneously by the actor in the two symbolically contradictory worlds. The areas of individual disempowerment were clearly manifested in the research, whenever the actors became involved in communication process with partners from institutions representative for the culture of the majority – the strangers staying outside the neighborhood – the main scene for the part of socially engaged empowering researcher for whom the neighborhood proved to be only a starting point. Their intersubjectivity was not open enough to broaden their interpretations with the perspective of the "other".

RESEARCHER'S EMPOWERING INTERVENTIONS IN THE COURSE OF THE PARTICIPATORY SOCIALLY ENGAGED RESEARCH ON THE YOUTH FROM AN UNPRIVILEGED NEIGHBORHOOD

The above-presented areas of disempowerment of youth from the unprivileged neighborhood and an attempt to outline the logic of empowerment from the theoretical perspective in terms of which the areas of disempowerment were defined, let us better understand the scope and the orientation of the empowering interventions undertaken by the socially engaged researcher as well as their results. When an interactional perspective was assumed by me in perceiving and understanding the investigated world, the areas of disempowerment were expressed in the same logic.

My interventions were not planned in the research concept, and resulted as a response to the disagreement to the course of the processes

observed by me – firstly as a participative observer – at the time of the research and even much later⁴. The reason to act was a request on the part of the research actors or/and my personal disagreement to the way the representatives of the world of strangers misused their power, which brought about profound consequences in the research actors' lives. The more I act, the deeper I understand the logic of the main process reconstructed in the research – the interactionally-oriented process of social inclusion/exclusion.

The space where empowering action proceeded was communication between the representatives of the two described social worlds. Rethinking the empowering actions, I took up the task to arrange them into two types according to the reconstructed aims:

- ♦ To open communication and let “the fellow” get the identity valuable in the social world of strangers, which gives him or her the possibility to learn our world and get a satisfactory status, and to simultaneously allow him or her to construct satisfactory self-definition
- ♦ to bring about change (within one social world) in a typical way for defining (categorizing) the representatives of the other world and to unblock communication overburdened with stigmatizing practices

Bearing in mind these above-mentioned goals, the empowering interventions of the researcher taken up during the study can be arranged into two categories: bridging social worlds and social advocacy.

BRIDGING SOCIAL WORLDS

In my view, this category comprises such actions that bring together representatives of different social worlds through the organization of such communication contexts that will make it possible for both sides to get to know better the rationale of the other party, as well

⁴ I still have contact with a few of the research actors and intervene whenever they ask me to and I feel convinced and empowered to do so. The reflection upon the context of the post-research interventions is still in progress.

as to exist in the world of the strangers with a highly valued identity in its symbolic structure. Examples of such actions can be the events organized „in-between the worlds“. Since the logic of interactively understood disempowerment is based on the mechanism of stigmatization of the representatives of the cultural minority, and a stigma is a characteristic given within the communication based on superficial knowledge of the “others”, one of the dimensions of empowering activities can be construction of the social spaces enabling getting to know one another. Reflection on the actions taken by me as part of the study helped me to organize them into efforts aimed at creating social space:

- ♦ making people more sensitive to the perspective of the “others”;
- ♦ marking the existence of the “others” with highly valued identities in the world of the cultural majority.

An example of actions designed to combine the, otherwise consistent, aims was a photographic project in which – after several months of collaboration with famous photographers from Łódź – they showed everyday life in their neighborhood. Such off-subjective picture of the space of childhood in one of the old neighborhoods in Łódź, combined with the interpretations meant to put it into context invented by the authors themselves, took on the form of an action representing consciousness raising activities addressed to the representatives of the “world of strangers.”⁵ The perspective meant to make people more sensitive showed them the references to a structural, not individual, etiology of social problems in terms of which the old neighborhoods in Łódź are commonly perceived. On the other hand, the exhibition allowed to redefine the image of young unprivileged people by their appearance in the new social identity – high indexed in the whole community – the identity of an emerging, self-made artist. Hence, the action aimed at bridging the two worlds had a general dimension – a change in the social awareness undermining the idea prevailing in the whole society of youngsters from the old neighborhoods of Łódź, but also an individual dimension, since among the

⁵ Consciousness raising is a form of the radical social work. More in: Payne M., *Modern Social Work Theory*, Macmillan Press LTD, 1991.

guests invited to the opening of the exhibition there were parents, friends, neighbors and teachers of the youngsters, as well as other guests – representatives of the world of art, media and science, who until this meeting, had appeared to be interactively inaccessible. The comments expressed in the corridors, e.g. “I never would have thought that they are capable of this,” directly indicated a change in the social consciousness, although one should put the question concerning the stability and translatability of this new perspective onto the interpretation of social action conducted by such young people in the communication with their representatives in other social contexts.

To comprehend the empowering effect that might result from such inter-cultural meeting we can apply a concept devoted to identity work (Glaser, Strauss, 1985). Identity work can be associated and can intersect with biographical work, when an individual reworks his or her biography to construct a new identity or try to maintain the previous one. The concept of identity is connected with a concept of biography and, strictly speaking, with biographical processes. Changing the identity or “reconstituting of identity” (a biographical process) are elaborated and situated in the biography of an individual (Strauss, 1969: 144-146). The process leading to the appearance in the world of strangers in the positively perceived role can be the beginning of an empowering transformation, that by re-defining oneself in the context of the differently perceived past gives the impetus for action to change one’s own life or in the neighborhood, in order to recover in these areas a sense of control. However, while assessing the empowering effect of such biographical event, a question should be posed as to whether such project intended by the researcher as work done on the identity of an individual by other persons (here the researcher *per se*) can evolve into self-identity work of strengthening (empowering) character that will not entrap the individual in his or her dissimilarity and lack of ability to change this image.⁶

⁶ Identity self – work – mainly the work of the individual on his or her identity, i.e. on creating the content aspects of individual self-concept in reference to his or her core activity. (Konecki, 2006).

SOCIAL ADVOCACY

As an engaged researcher, I entered the role of a social advocate every time the interactional scenarios, in which the actors of the research were acting, assumed the form of a 'vicious circle' – such as when the stigmatization process became so advanced that the communication between the research actors and the representatives of the decisive institutional bodies were blocked and there was a risk that the subjects of my research will be excluded from the role of a student, or a citizen, etc⁷.

Similarly to the case of bridging the worlds, the measures that I have qualified to the category of social advocacy are consistent – in their purpose and course – with the interactive concept of empowerment. If the loss of the influence exerted by the actors on the course of their own biography was associated with the process of stigmatization, the empowering action sought to create a social space redefining the way of interpreting the causes of the difficult relationship between the privileged representatives of decisive institutions (teachers, school social workers, probation officers, policemen, etc.) and the actors whose biographical course greatly depended on these representatives.

My involvement in the distorted communication was aimed at its re-opening with an underlying assumption of changing the interpretation of the partner in the said communication conducted by his or her interlocutors. The analysis of myself as an intermediary person clearly showed my sympathizing with the perspective of the actors, which was a side effect of being involved in a participatory, understanding research. Hence, I tried stronger to work on the redefinition of the communication partner on the part of the representatives of the institutions. My role can be referred to as a consciousness raising agent. In communication with the representatives of the institutions I tried to convince them to rethink their attitude to the research actors

⁷ The subjects of impaired communication, whose course I tried to change by creating circumstances conducive to the redefinition of the stigmatized image of the actors, were inter alia teachers and probation officers, hence the presented reflection is limited to them.

from the interpretation pattern of “maladjusted”, “difficult” – thus “guilty” to the pattern of the “challenging communication” amongst interactional partners with different social knowledge. In fact, work on communication in the context of a particular pair of interlocutors (actor-employee of an institution) had the features of actions aimed at broader social change – change of awareness of the persons representing decisive bodies seeking to include in their canon of interpretation premises of interactive or radical perspective⁸.

Examples of situations revealing the need for social advocacy may be these flashbacks taken from the research material:

Case 1: While talking with a teacher I am trying to assure him that Karol is doing his best to be a better student. Being convinced of it, because I am engaged in the process of teaching the boy, I am trying to encourage the teacher to be patient and to wait for the results, rather than expect a rapid qualitative change concerning the boy's grades:

Teacher: “How can I believe he is struggling hard (learning, AG) if I still see him with his mates at the gate ...”

Case 2: In a feverish exchange of words between a teacher and a boy called Marcin (in the presence of his mates from the neighborhood) the boy heard:

The teacher “If you do not stop behaving this way, you will end up in a correctional house for juvenile delinquents”.

These statements reveal the dominance of traditional modes of interpretation regarding “the causes of a pupil's behavior”, or traditional ways of dealing with “difficult pupils” – here we had an example of intimidating.

The first case demonstrated the inability to leave the level of defining Marcin as a stigma-bearer and to notice his efforts towards meeting the expectations related to the role of a student. Instead, the teacher only looked for empirical evidence to support the validity of the

⁸ More about radical premises to individual social problems interpretation in Payne M., 1991, Fook J., 1993

previous definition. The legitimacy of this definition is based on the interpretation of the presence at the gate in terms of a socially-burdened category of "street children" not in terms of the concept of a child on the street, which in the street sees a symptom, not the cause and/or the threat of social exclusion.

The second case reveals the need to redefine the merits of intimidation as a method of education, correction. The task of social advocacy in this situation is to make the school workers realize the necessity to consider and include in the course of communication with the representatives of the "world of fellows" their symbolic local structure. The development of a legitimate position of such knowledge in relation to the hitherto worked out teacher's knowledge at hand helps to avoid distortions in defining these and similar social situations. Intimidation, and other alike tactics serving to exert influence over a rebellious student, especially in the significant presence of his or her mates from the "world of fellows" are interpreted as the status-degrading tactics of a representative of the "enemies of the weakness and the Police", hence the reaction to them will deny the expectations of subjecting oneself to the influence of the teacher. In the long-term perspective, the repeatability of such a communication formula will lead to the fortification the partners in their definitions of the situation and blocking the communication based on stigma. Each interaction between a student and a teacher will be accompanied by tension and similar dynamics tending to get more "hot-headed", which in turn can lead to the incorporation by the teacher of tactics oriented at the exclusion of challenging students from the school community – dissemination of the stigmatized image of the student in the context of the whole school, gradual redefinition of him or her towards the "identity of a suspect." This will secondarily distort the communication not only with this one teacher, but also with other teachers and relationship with them is going to take on the form of "gathering evidence" to prove the validity of such a stigmatized image of a student who is excluded from the impact on changing it.

In these cases, social advocacy involved an attempt to explain the risks arising from the application of traditional ways of interpreting

the actions of the boys from the “hood” in the school context, trying to convince people to other – alternative – grounds as the basis for reflective teacher professionalism in communication with the student recognizing another point of reference as the fundamental symbolic structure. A similar logic of intervention characterized the researcher when she intervened in the communication with the representatives of decisive bodies, including, for example, the police as exemplified by a situation reported below.

The boys have been detained by plain-clothes police officers and they are in the patrol car outside my house. The officers detained them when they were standing at the store. I leave. In the car there is a woman and a man, and – in the back seat: Y, a boy whom I do not know and D., and in front of the car there is L.. I walk to the car and ask what has happened, introducing myself as a street pedagogue. A woman answers me that they want to check the boys, because they saw them standing on the street when they were passing by.

I explain that I am their tutor, I know them and they are good kids. The police checks them via a short-wave. In the car we talk about the sense of standing at the gates that exposed young people to constant police checks.

Is there no common room or another place, so that they would not be standing on the street? – asks a policewoman

A: In the hood there are only gates and streets. – I explain. – There is no such place. These guys will always be street children, because they have no other places to spend their time.

Cop: And what about the yard?

A: Then the neighbors call the police because it is too loud.

– It's true – interferes a policeman – these yards are like wells.

A: Exactly – I say – the sound echoes, and these are young people who want to laugh, „fool around“

Next, I learn that today the police is interested in the minors, because they are having an “action” so my boys had better go away, because there will come the next patrol, and they will be examined again, and it will be like this for another two days.

– So what – growls D (one of the actors.) – I sit at home???

I silence him with a meaningful glance.

Policewoman: Not at home, but there on the X street – responds to the comment the policewoman – in the yard or somewhere, but not here. (...)

(...) A conversation starts between the policemen and me about the specifics of working with street youth. After discussing the difficult situation of young people who are pushed away from the neighborhood, the police themselves undermine the legitimacy of their preventive measures.

Policewoman: You see, what we do – scare teenagers. ;–)

We say goodbye to one another in a friendly atmosphere. When the police officers leave, the policewoman waves her hand in a friendly manner to the boys. The boys reciprocate the gesture with a smile. One of them, with a grin, comments „under his breath“:

D: Fuck off

A: I ask you that you leave this place for tonight – I say heading home.

T: But Ms Anita, why???!! – asks another boy

A: Because in a moment there will be another police car going by.

T: So they will check us again and leave – comes the reply.

The space of action representative for the role of a social advocate described here thus expands to include the communication with other decisive bodies who adopt the attitude towards the actors from the perspective of the identity of the suspect. Their presence on the street initiates the elimination tactics of similar nature in their interactive logic to the school tactics.

Here, it is not the behavior that undermines the authority of teachers and is received as an indicator of demoralization and “guilt” of the boy from the hood, but the fact that the boys are standing at the gate near the place of residence (plus their specific kind of dress – hoods, their posture – legs wide apart, hands in the pockets, widely spaced-out elbows) that become the prerequisites for social reactions directed by such identity. The reactions of young people who do not have the consent to the interpretation of the gate as the problem and indicating that the gate is a symptom of the problem – their social

exclusion from the neighborhood – re-affirm the validity of suspicion, increasing as a rule the tension in the communication with the police in general.

Interestingly, it is the interactions with the police that show the significance of social advocacy, since they reveal the helplessness of the guys from the neighborhood experienced in the legally permitted context. The mechanism of their stigmatization described at the beginning of this chapter, in which powerful neighbors give them the identity of a suspect, facilitates the tactics of elimination. These appear to result in a gradual shift of the boys from the area of courtyards and internal streets into the streets where they can choose one of the gates as their place, which becomes a factor developing interactions with “outsiders” from outside of the neighborhood, such as the police, in which again the teenagers are granted the identity of the suspect. The disagreement to the identity assigned by the “strangers”, when it cannot be verified, raises the tension that accompanies the consecutive interactions with the representatives of the above types, a pedestrian, the police, etc. – determining its difficult course for both parties.

The described situation is especially meaningful as the context of the process of constructing and maintaining social identity of the actors. On the one hand, it shows the contradictions of social expectations formulated by different partners in their interactions in the immediate vicinity. The representatives of the general social laws require that the boys should return to the places banned by the representatives of the informal social order. On the other hand, it also shows how the status given in the neighborhood and the way of dealing with it, develop the process of stigmatization, enhancing the way the boys are perceived – they are not considered as persons, but as representatives of a discredited social category needing the help of a social advocate.

The actions of a social advocate in this context aimed at the emancipation of the minority perspective in order for it to become an element of the social mind of the “strangers” – the representatives

of the neighbors-non-participants, probation officers, police, and the “fellows”, so that they can understand their social activities as actions “normalizing the abnormal situation.” Teaching negotiations and forcing the perspective of the youth excluded from the influence on the neighborhood in the contexts which stigmatize them would be a natural form of development in scope of empowering activities.

CONCLUSION

This text is a result of a reflection of a socially engaged researcher on her activities taken up during the study. The actions, conducted spontaneously without any strategic planning, manifested in their nature the premises of empowerment. To understand their characteristics, the author first tried to reconstruct the logic of these actions in the language of the symbolic interactionism perspective. She started with the assumption that understanding the empowering action in the study is possible only in terms of the perspective that was used to understand the actors’ social action and that, gradually, with the deepening of the research insight into the world of the studied actors – steered the researcher into such comprehension of the situation, which sparked her dissent, expressed by specific actions. Hence, firstly, the author attempted to conduct reconceptualization of the concept of empowerment in interactional terms, only to circle in her language both the areas of the lack of power significant for the actors, and the orientation of empowering actions.

The reflection can go further in many directions. In my view, from the theoretical and methodological perspective, it might be worthwhile to deepen the reflection on the interactively oriented concept of empowerment, both by saturating it with subconcepts, which would allow for a more complete understanding of not even the orientation itself but rather the social mechanisms of the social contexts that comprise empowerment. On the other hand, the development of the reflection can go towards the reconstruction of other areas needing empowerment in the form of both bridging the worlds and social advocacy, as well as other forms not considered herein. Nevertheless, I would assign a special place to the reflection on

the empowering results of socially engaged research, both in the pragmatic and ethical dimension.

RÉSUMÉ

LES INTERVENTIONS D'AUTONOMISATION
(EMPOWERING) AU COURS DE LA RECHERCHE
ENGAGÉE. L'EXEMPLE DE LA RECHERCHE
D'ORIENTATION INTERACTIVE ET PARTICIPATIVE,
RÉALISÉE AUPRÈS DES JEUNES DÉFAVORISÉS
DEMEURANT DANS LE VOISINAGE À ŁÓDŹ

Nous présentons des interventions d'autonomisation entreprises lors de la recherche participative engagée socialement auprès des jeunes défavorisés de voisinage à Łódź.

Bien que les interventions dans le vécu des acteurs aient été spontanées, elles nous ont permis d'arriver à des conclusions portant sur les objectifs et les orientations des interventions, et par la suite à dessiner des actions d'autonomisation que l'on a entreprises lors de cette recherche interactive et engagée socialement.

Dans un premier temps, nous avons présenté le projet de la recherche et les résultats de l'étude sur l'exclusion sociale des jeunes. Dans un deuxième temps, nous avons présenté le concept d'empowerment qui reste en cohérence avec la perspective adoptée par le chercheur engagé, ce qui nous a permis de définir de façon logique des champs de manque d'autonomisation (disempowerment) de la population étudiée.

Lors de la discussion durant la recherche nous avons abordé des dimensions interactives orientées sur les interventions d'autonomisation de deux mondes sociaux auxquels les jeunes participent : le « monde de siens » et le « monde des autres ».

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