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## **SOCIAL AGENCY AND SYMBOLIC STRUCTURE. THE CASE OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN POLAND**

### **Abstract**

Changes in Poland, being a result of transformation of economic system open the necessity of formation new social policy and new social assistance system, including professional social work. Professional character of social workers job is being constructed not only by law or institutional regulations, but through everyday activities undertaken by social workers. One of the consequences of these practices is the strategy of informal evaluation and classification of welfare clients. To understand the social workers daily professional practice is important to identify strategies, arguments and language codes lying behind them. We try to interpret this kind of social workers' activity refer to different theoretical perspectives.

**Key words:** social work, social agency, reflexivity, apparent action

### **The point of departure – rapid changes, nascent globalization and social theory**

Globalization gradually changing the social environment of the functioning of the classic sociology. What is fundamental here is the problematisation of the so far obvious notion of “society”, traditionally rooted in the idea of the nation-state. Globalization change the role of the nation-state and the position of the concept of society in sociological theory. The notion loses its explanatory power. The key question is concerned with redefinition of the meaning of the social. (Dean 1997; Freitag 2002; Touraine 1998; Urry 2000). It open once again the well-known question concerning the problem of the social order, that is the relationship between individual instrumental activity and the base of the persistence of overindividual social wholes. Aside from the manner of the interpretation of the bases of this relationship – instrumental action or social structure – in reality, this relationship,

not its elements, was an object of the reflection of classical sociology (Ritzer 1990). However in different periods dominated an “extremist” sociological interpretations concentrating their own interest, first of all, on one side of action-structure relationship, leading to theoretically limited “two sociologies” (Dawe 1970). Beginning from the eighties we observe in sociological theory a strongly foreshadowed tendency to building bridges between micro and macro sociological perspectives. Synthetic tendencies are presented both in American and European sociology. There is shaped „the new theoretical movement” (Alexander 1988) bridging the action – structure boundaries. It is a theoretical as well as empirical problem. The present text and project in general is in greater depth rooted in action-structure theoretical reflection and its empirical verification. The main object of research interests are social workers symbolical practices, particularly strategies, arguments and language codes using by them in relations with social welfare clients.

## **The field of Polish social work**

Changes in Poland, being a result of transformation of economic system, and Polish aspirations to become a member of European Union, open the necessity of formation new social policy and new social assistance system. System adapting European standards and answering social problems did not meet earlier in this scale (unemployment). One of defined target of new social policy and social assistance system, is to help people and families becoming more independent oneself and more integrate with social environment. Basic way of supporting of persons and families should be, restored in Polish reality, social work. The majority of social assistance services including various categories of cash benefits as well as different forms of non-financial support, are provided by social assistance centres and powiat centres for family support. Among the non-financial forms of support, the main role played social work. The most important social actors in the welfare system are social workers. Naturally identifying social workers as main welfare actors is a part of much broader discussion not only on welfare system, but on power relations and social justice as well.

Polish welfare system is regulated by Social Assistance Act of 12 March 2004. The system are basing on western model and a kind of “welfare culture”, that is, institutional relations, as well as professional practice. One of the most important issue was and still is a problem of professionalisation of social workers in Poland (Granosik 2006). In context of the “welfare culture” social workers have to perform activities, which require knowledge, skills and responsibility. Professional social work as a part of welfare culture include professional identity, which is a result of social workers intergroup contacts, let them defining themselves by belonging to this professional group. Identity with that group determinates essential condition of participation in the group activity and loyalty. Create professional boundaries between what is acceptable and unacceptable. Professional identity of social workers are influenced by education to social work – professional skills and competences – and institutional conditions – norms, principles, formal rules, institutional framework, legal aspects, social control etc.

But the problem is, that professional character of social workers job is being constructed not only by law or institutional regulations, but through everyday activities undertaken by social workers too. Social work is a reflective activity and social worker is a reflective practitioner (Howe 2009). "Social work does not impose a set of prescriptions on clients. Instead, it reacts to clients and the world in which they live, and it does so through reflection" (Payne 2002: 127–128). To understand the social workers daily professional practice is important not only to take into consideration the formal and institutional environments, but also identify strategies, arguments and language codes lying behind them.

### **'Apparent action' as an effect**

Scarce public resources, material as well as symbolic, and structural arrangements of organizations inherited partly from the ancient regime of state socialism doesn't allow the realization of procedures imposed from the centre of global capitalism. To these difficulties should be added the social workers' inferior position in the whole network of public administration. First and foremost it means limited range of power and deep dependence on local government authorities. Another and no less important factor is the unfavorable economic condition of social workers and, connected with this, the low prestige of the profession.

Social workers, trying to cope with these contradictions and the discrepancy between imposed requirements and limited structural properties express highly reflexive behavior. In effect, as plenty of research shows (Trawkowska 2007) they conform to outside necessities, that is administration procedures, only superficially, without proper realization of general organizational aims. In Polish sociological literature such a solution is called "apparent action" (Lutyński 1977). Apparent action is officially perceived as important for the realization of certain social aims but, in fact, it cannot be realized. However, in a given organization almost everybody knows about the fictional character of this action and, paradoxically, this knowledge isn't officially recognized. This kind of action was a common way to deal with the contradictions in state socialist organizations. Constant shortage of various resources and outside administrative pressure found its effect in "apparent action". Today in spite of the system transition, "apparent action" is still conducted, usually (but it is not certain) in the field of public services.

Two important things should be emphasized. First, apparent action is apparent only in organizational terms, that is, from the point of view of a certain organization and its requirements. Sociologically, apparent action is not non-action but action *per se* thus extremely important in the context of this analysis. According to our findings, such a practice is preceded by reflexive deliberation so we can call it "project" (in Archer's meaning). Second, apparent action, at least in the field of Polish social work, is a result of the collective effort. Three years of personal experience of one of us in a social service organization shows that every difficult situation resulting from incompatibility between

procedures and available resources is usually resolved in an informal way by the whole group of social workers who work together.

One of the consequences of these practices is the strategy of informal evaluation and classification of welfare clients. If material resources, that is welfare benefits for clients, are strictly limited, social workers need special forms of categorization, a kind of social hierarchy of the clients, or, to put it in another way, a distinction which divides the clients into “deserving and undeserving poor”. However, aside from this utilitarian need, purely symbolic procedure also matters. Social workers’ ill-defined professional identity, their uncertain status in changing and overlapping social structures need to be strengthened by drawing a clear symbolic boundary between them and welfare clients. Thus the part of social workers’ efforts in the building of classification systems of the clients is devoted to this. We should remember that very often individuals from these two groups are near to each other in the social space. This is a clear result of Polish social workers’ inferior economic position.

Regarding our personal experience and, partly, existing research which concerns Polish social workers we can assume that this meaning-making work to assign classifications is done in a manner called by Erving Goffman and Randall Collins “interaction rituals”. Social workers conduct the rituals, in which classification systems are made, during their everyday work activity. Symbolic forms and social categorizations are established through informal conversations and discussions about concrete clients, hence, in this way, the hierarchy of welfare clients appears. Using Collins’ theory (2004) it is possible to say that thanks to these interaction rituals social workers single out particularly bad clients (the lazy, the trouble-makers) who become “negative sacred objects” and, consequently, markers of norms, the personifications of border lines which determine the world of decent and indecent people.

Interaction rituals, realized in social workers’ workplaces, take the form of negotiations. The social circumstances mentioned above mean that these processes are made with higher reflexivity. The problem is that Collins’ theory of interaction rituals presents ambivalence in this respect.

On the one hand Collins (2004) acknowledges the process of an internal conversation (therefore some kind of reflexivity), on the other hand he maintains that agency is a question of emotional energy and symbols, not deliberation. (embodied cultural capital is like a social gyroscope that navigates to given interactions) thus this problem highlights theoretical questions and dilemmas that should be considered.

## **Dilemmas and questions**

### **The problem of classification**

The problem of social classifications has already appeared in classical sociological analysis. In this respect Emil Durkeim’s and Marcell Mauss’ work (1963), *Primitive*

*Form of Classification*, has a special meaning because it was the first serious attempt to combine symbolic forms with social structure (using contemporary language). In another of Durkheim's books, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (2001), this idea was further elaborated and then became the basis for other prominent analyses, such as, to single out only two, Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* or David Bloor's *Knowledge and Social Imagery*.

Among plenty of neo-Durkheimian works, Bourdieu's theory deserves special attention. Of course Bourdieu, developing his approach, drew on various sociological traditions – Weberian, Marxists etc. – but a Durkheimien trace is quite clear there (Wacquant 1995) and this line of thinking is very useful for our analysis. A perfect example of this is research devoted to “academic forms of classification” in which Bourdieu (1989) showed that professors' classification of students' work is connected with the social origins of the students. Such classifications are unconscious, and remain part of professors' habitus. The important thing is that, according to Bourdieu, classifications and principles of “vision and division” are embodied and consequently, inaccessible for reflexive deliberation.

Margaret Archer (2007) sees in Bourdieu's theory a fundamental error called “the fallacy of conflation” – the elusion of agency and structure that “prevents the interplay between ‘parts’ and ‘people’ from being the foundation of cultural dynamics” (Archer 1988: xiii). In this paper we don't want to settle the general problem of human agency (whether it is reflexive or not) but consider only this specific peripheral context of symbolic action and hypothetically determine possible solutions. Therefore Archer as well as other sociologists declare that an unreflexive form of action presented by Bourdieu is impossible because of special social circumstances which actors have to deal with today. As we mentioned above, nascent globalization and, connected with it, contextual discontinuity, force reflexivity thus Bourdieu's vision of agency should be corrected.

Bourdieu admits of reflexivity, a deliberative choice of the action line, only in the particular situation of crisis: “Times of crises, in which the routine adjustment of subjective and objective structures is brutally disrupted, constitute a class of circumstances when indeed ‘rational choice’ often appears to take over” (Wacquant 1989: 44). Other researchers, basing their opinions on the fact that contemporary late modernity is full of crises and the inevitable disruption of subjective and objective structures, introduced corrections to Bourdieu's model. In this respect Paul Sweetman proposed the new term, ‘reflexive habitus’ which express a property characteristic of changing conditions of current everyday life – habitual reflexivity. A similar line of argumentation can be found Matthew Adams' work (2006). Some authors, like Lash and Urry (1994), underline strongly that experiences of reflexivity vary across the social structure and, as an effect, the social world of late modernity is increasingly divided into groups of ‘reflexivity winners’ and ‘reflexivity losers’

It seems to be that Polish social workers, forced to cope with the incongruency of their own subjective schemata and objective changing structure, could express habitual reflexivity in their professional activity. Nevertheless such a proposal is questionable.

Archer rightly criticizes this perspective as internally contradictory, and suggests abandoning the concept of habitus as useless in our highly reflexive world – “in fact, given how ‘habitus’ stressed the pre-adaptation of people to circumstances and the ‘semi-conscious,’ ‘quasi-automatic’ nature of its operations (...) it is hard to think of any concept less helpful for dealing with conscious deliberations and the determination of choices.” (Archer 2007: 56)

However, Archer goes further in criticizing Bourdieu –

since the habitus is always held to be the *embodiment* of a strong practical sense, giving a feel for the game, one can seriously question whether today’s novel global games *can be played* by virtue of embodied practical mastery. In other words, new games with such names as ‘external investment,’ ‘labour mobility,’ ‘foreign exchange dealing,’ ‘multi-lingualism’ or ‘permanent software upgrading’ need to be mastered by an intensively *discursive and deliberative approach*, one exceeding the possibilities of *embodied* skills – how can stock exchange trading or computer programming be embodied? (Archer 2007: 56).

With regard to Bourdieu’s vision of action and a social actor’s ontological status Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (1991) (Bourdieu’s former collaborators), went in a similar direction. They deny the perspective according to which an agent is deeply involved in social forces and unconscious of structures that exert pressure on his mind and body. Actually, Boltanski and Thévenot abandon the very principle of symbolic violence and give actors not only relatively free space for subjective action but, which is more important, admit actors’ strong critical capacity. Such a “sociology of critique” which allegedly replaces Bourdieu’s critical sociology doesn’t present actors as the victims of illusion but agents who on the one hand can relate to the outside world with a critical view and on the other hand, which should be emphasized, can justify their action. Critical thinking and justification are activated especially in moments of crises when “something is going wrong” (Boltanski, Thévenot 1999). In this process individuals are able to recognize an unjust state of affairs and through dispute with others express their point of view, based on certain justifications. Social actors constantly use the basic grammar of modes of justification, identified by Boltanski and Thévenot as “orders of worth” (*cites*). Despite the fact that every social context has its own order and possible principles of justification which can be used within it the number of them are limited. Boltanski and Thévenot identified six *cites*.

Again we can refer this perspective to social workers’ activity in uncertain situations, that are, as we have argued, almost everyday conditions for them today. When they classify welfare clients they have to, like every individual in a similar situation, find a proper form of justification. Whether they use modes outlined by Boltanski and Thévenot or try to find other spheres of values is less important. The point is a sociological way of agency – how great a range of freedom in using various forms of justification do they have? Some commentators convince us that Boltanski and Thévenot present a kind of voluntarism (Wuggenig 2008) – social actors are virtually free in their action, they are

constrained only by a “principle of equivalence” (the number of them is limited) as the basis of certain disputes but not by social structures.

Recognition of social actors’ critical capacities, especially in a moment of crisis, has great value. But the whole ontological status of the actor, presented by Boltanski and Thévenot is difficult to accept. Michele Lamont, a Canadian sociologist who worked first with Bourdieu and then with Thévenot has introduced important nuances which corrected both perspectives.

Lamont developed the theory of symbolic boundaries, defined in the following way: “symbolic boundaries are the lines that define some people, groups, and things while exclude others. These distinction can be expressed through normative interdictions (taboos), cultural identities, attitudes and practices, and more generally through patterns of likes and dislikes” (Lamont 2009: 172).

Lamont doesn’t accept Bourdieu’s habitus, capital and field, considering them concepts presenting a too rigid vision of social life. Symbolic boundaries are characterized by various levels of strength, some of them co-create social hierarchies but others do not – the latter remain signals of differences. Furthermore Lamont depicted a much more dynamic vision of contemporary societies with overlapping and continuously changing systems of semiotic codes (Lamont 1992). Agents can use limited sets of available cultural repertoire (symbolic boundaries or criteria of evaluation aren’t equally available for all) but this usage changes along with structural conditions. It may feature in social classes but in whole nations too. In her other book, devoted to evaluation of academic works, Lamont underlines other factors, like for instance the self-concept of evaluators. Thus Lamont found a middle way between voluntarism and determinism and, contrary to Bourdieu, makes “room for the relative autonomy of symbolic boundaries from structural conditions”, emphasizing “the possibility for individuals to actively choose among cultural resources, even if their choices are largely channeled by ‘cultural supply side’ of the equation” (Lamont 1992: 135).

Both Lamont and Boltanski and Thévenot downplay the question of bodily practice. As we know it was a highly important problem for Bourdieu, which contributed to understanding the general problem of human agency – mental schemata are embodied and thanks to this an agent, without reflexive deliberation, can “feel the game”. Nascent globalization and rapid changes question such a perspective.

### Bodily schemata and reflexivity

The corporal aspect of agency evokes an important question of the level (or levels) of reflexivity. Is deliberation and reflection really ubiquitous and bodily schemata established through socialization doesn’t matter any longer? Archer argues that ‘the new cosmopolitans’, individuals with various social background who experience global mobility are highly reflexive and socialization doesn’t play an important role in their course of action. In our opinion such an assessment is exaggerated. Regardless of the increasing reflexivity of everyday life, which is an indisputable fact, some elements of

socialization, especially embodied cultural capital, still matter. It is difficult to question the fundamental problem of language, an element which leads to a success or failure in school. In this context some parts of language can be treated as an object of actors' reflection (the distinction subject/object is the condition of reflexivity) but others parts remain unconscious.

Our first investigations confirms this strictly corporal, probably semi-conscious element of social practice. When social workers describe welfare clients and, consciously or not, try to assess them, they very often use sensual language. Usually moral categories, especially those that define negative behavior, are presented in odour classification ("I don't like to work with her, she is unemployed but she can't even clean her house that still *stinks*"), which clearly evokes bodily deposited dispositions.

Moreover, some researchers observed that even in areas of highly developed financial operations which, as Archer rightly said, invoke a need of profound reflexivity, bodily practices still matter (Widick 2004).

So how to find a middle way between reflexivity of action and embodied, semi-conscious practices? Theoretical assumptions and empirical evidences indicate that we should recognize reflexivity, clearly visible in the rapid changes on the periphery, and, at the same time, not neglect the corporal, unconscious level of agency.

Maybe we need to return to the old theme of deep and superficial structures, developed in the area of structuralism, which has been recalled by William H. Sewell (1992) in his considerations about agency and structure. How profound deep structures are and what the difference is between them and structures more "surface" should be the object of further investigations. For sure we cannot fully assume this strictly intellectual point of view, embodied in intellectuals' dispositions which perceives the social world as a matter of common reflexivity (Bourdieu 1994) but simultaneously we shouldn't be blind to the clear fact, that changes which occur these days lead to the rupture of smooth reproduction of social structures and, which is connected with it, semi-conscious agency.

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