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Small town mobility

Summer has arrived, and many of our readers are probably in the Masurian Lakes, one of Poland's top summer destinations. If you are among the unlucky ones who are not, CMR Spotlight will take you there!

We will do so through the research of prof. Wojciech Łukowski and his team, who have been investigating territorial and social mobility in the Masurian town of Giżycko. They ponder what high-quality mobility is, and find (in line with Steven Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources Theory) that conservation of resources is key for migrants: "migrations are undertaken not to break with the place of origin, but because of the lack of satisfactory conditions for preserving resources therein". No wonder, when that place is in the Masurian Lakes!

A small town in a big world. A contribution to the anthropology of mobility

Wojciech Łukowski

About the project "Territorial and social mobility in the biographical and generation experience of residents of a small town"

In social sciences, attention is focused primarily on large cities and metropolises. It is assumed that they form the axis of the development dynamics of a given country, continent and the whole world.

Small and medium-sized cities and towns appear in sociological texts less often. "Small" in the official statistics means towns with up to 20,000 inhabitants, while those with average population of 20,000 to 100,000 inhabitants are described as "medium". A significant part of them is classified as crisis towns, towns with declining potential, places stagnating and threatened by marginalization. It is widely discussed, at least in Poland, that small and medium-sized towns are primarily sources of migration to large cities and metropolises, and are also a migratory background for more developed countries. The advancing globalization processes, the rising potential of movement both in the physical and digital space, suggest a trivial assumption: that a small city is located not so much in the surrounding region or is an element building the structure of a given state, but rather is connected by direct ties with the globalizing world. As one of the interviewees said: our town is much bigger than we think, and the world is much smaller.

Demography appears to be a key issue for the existence of these towns. The long-term demographic processes determine both changes in social ties and local political dynamics. This issue is rarely acknowledged in the social discourses of these towns, but has a decisive influence on their economic and socio-cultural condition. Various interactions between these issues can be spotted, showing links between the tendency to migrate, the aging of the local communities, asymmetry between the sexes within given generations, generationally and biographically rooted habitus.

How do we study a small town?

There are difficulties with such formatting of the research that it will be based on tools that allow the precision of measurement and adequacy of the tools used for this subject. It is possible that nowadays reality is becoming more and more fluid, consequences of intentional actions increasingly unpredictable and surprising, the vulnerability of systems to damage greater, resilience smaller, and uncertainty present everywhere.

Perhaps that is why the proper setting of "measurement tools" in a small or medium town creates the possibility of microscopic insight into the nature of social processes. Multi-sited ethnographic research should be particularly efficient. It allows not only to leave the traditionally understood "research area", which the researcher enters for a short period of time equipped with very limited sources, such as biographical interviews. A multi-sited approach allows to move quite freely between "research fields" that are physically located in a given space, and ones that can be located anywhere on the globe and anywhere in cyberspace. Thanks to such an approach, the temporal dimension also becomes available, as some "fields" exist in the past. Not only the "fields" themselves count, but also the relations between them are important.

We therefore put a map of the "research fields" on the social map of a small town. They include, among others, clusters of secondary and vocational school graduates, a cluster of local experts (including teachers, entrepreneurs, priests, politicians), people that emigrated from this town and are now residing in other places in Poland and around the world. The "field" can also be a school chronicle, local Internet portal or forum, archival collection, artifact placed in the city space, everyday behavior of residents (shopping, use of services), unexpected events and reactions (e.g. death of a known person, accident, fire, long-term drought). Gradually, a new, diverse and nuanced social picture emerges, also due to the simultaneous use of inductive and deductive analytical procedures.

What town are we exploring and why this one, not another?

A town of nearly thirty thousand located in north-eastern Poland in the area of the so-called Western and Northern Territories – lands incorporated into Poland in 1945 and constituting about one third of the country's territory - was selected for the research. The settlement is also located in an attractive natural and tourist area (Great Masurian Lakes). We assumed that it is impossible to perfectly combine two important research objectives - the typicality of the selected research site, allowing extrapolation of its results to a wider context (residents of all small and medium towns in Poland) with an in-depth examination of one case. The choice of this second goal prevailed. Significant, if not even crucial, was the fact that the project manager had been carrying out research in this city and the surrounding area for about twenty years. He has been observing this place almost every day for many years. Two team members are biographically associated with the town, and the third has a clearly different biographical experience (socialization in a big city, studying at universities in two countries of Western Europe, traveling around the world). This biographical "equipment" contains a potential risk, but also can be taken as a valuable resource.

What is the core of the project?

Mobility is a very basic social action that is undertaken in the life context of an individual, family or community. The project is however not about mobility in itself, but about what is attributed to it – it's specific content. Relevant in this context are attempts to integrate research on territorial and social mobility. How can one

identify patterns of this mobility that change over time? What is the content of this change? It is quite possible that some of these patterns will be permanent?

The core of the project is the biographical research of the town's school graduates, who completed all town schools over the course of forty years. Chosen individuals graduated in selected years in intervals of 10 years from the mid-1970s to the period after Poland's accession to the European Union. Such research methods allow us to investigate diverse biographical experiences. It also allows to track how these experiences changed in time depending on the historical context. We meet people who have stayed in their hometown and its surroundings, those who have decided to travel - usually to larger cities in the country, and those who have decided to travel abroad.

What is mobility of high versus low quality?
When we take a biographical and – indirectly - also a generational perspective, one of the key questions that organizes the research process is the question about the quality of a given mobility. This question is part of a wider question about the quality of life –in individual perspective, but also

in a given historical period: which patterns were considered desirable, attractive in the local community. This allows to perceive mobility in the context of the circumstances of the historical period in which it takes place, the possibilities and limitations characteristic to it. We are also looking for more universal patterns, that are not subject to historical deviations.

In our opinion, mobility can be of high quality when there is place for a relatively balanced management of diversified resources, their accumulation and conversion. High-quality mobility is also the one that makes individuals, families and communities resilient to sudden, unforeseen changes - due to their resources, adaptability to changed conditions, innovative use of resources available to date and the ability to create new ones. These resources are interrelated and interdependent on each other. They cover equally: material, cognitive and emotional resources. Their key feature is not so much the volume of individual resources, but their interdependence, figurations they create (in the sense given by Norbert Elias).

Socioecology of a small town
This high-quality mobility opens the door to the research effort that analyzes mobility in socioecological terms. A small town is perceived as an ecological system, passing through adaptation cycles seen in conjunction with other adaptation cycles (e.g. transformation after 1989/1990, Poland's accession to the European Union, convergence processes of the local and regional economy in the context of global economic changes). A small town is perceived as an internally diversified socioecological system, linked to other systems whose impact on the

processes taking place in a small town is definitely asymmetrical. External systems influence processes in a small town, meanwhile the small town influences the processes taking place in large cities or countries receiving migrants. The socio-cultural and demographic condition of the small town results from these processes. Due to migration, it also spreads throughout the globalized social space-time.

Mobility of high quality - first conclusions from the research

One of the issues that emerged from the research of both theoretical and empirical significance is the search for what constitutes high quality mobility and its determinants. Defining the term of high-quality mobility seems equally important. Surprisingly, this term is virtually absent in contemporary migration studies. Formulation of possible answers on both normative and empirical levels seems to be lacking also (both levels are closely connected with each other).

There are two ontological assumptions underlying the reflection on high-quality mobility. The first is widely accepted in one of the dominant trends in social sciences: social activities are intentional, but they cause many unintended effects and consequences. This assumption not only can be, but also should be related to mobility.

The second assumption is linked to the first one and concerns contingency in the life of a single human being, family or community. Not only intentional actions lead to many unintended consequences, but one also has to deal more and more with various unforeseen events (e.g. effects of traffic accidents, loss of physical efficiency, consequences of climate change and environmental changes, removal from friends on Facebook, becoming a target of internet hate).

Therefore, when asking about high-quality mobility, we consider these two assumptions. The question about high-quality mobility is part of the reflection on the quality of life.

This question directs attention, among other issues, towards the methods of acquiring, maintaining and managing resources. Research conducted within the project "Mobility in the generation and biographical experience of the inhabitants of a small town" leads to perceiving mobility as a process of obtaining (but also losing) resources and a way of managing them. Acquiring resources (and their loss) seems not as important as maintaining them. Conducted research demonstrates the usefulness of Steven Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources Theory and his main assumption: that people devote much more attention and make much more effort to preserve resources than to change or acquire them.

Reconstruction of biographical trajectories, especially the parts in which an attempt is made to capture intergenerational transmission, clearly indicates the pursuit of preserving resources, not changing them, including a change that could be called a radical break with family of origin, principles, life goals considered important and worthy of implementation. This assumption seems not so "sensitive" to the nature of undertaken migrations nor spatial displacements. Both those who remain in their place of origin (in this case in the examined small town), and those who undertake continental and intercontinental travels - in our opinion - very clearly orientate themselves on resources obtained by family

transmission. Radically changed "scenery" (e.g. Giżycko converted into London or San Francisco) does not weaken this aspiration and creates only a semblance of radical change. Therefore – astonishingly - migrations are undertaken not to break with the place of origin, but because of the lack of satisfactory conditions for preserving resources therein. Often, however, the effects of territorial displacements also have unforeseen effects - they distract migrants from the intentions for which migrations were undertaken and bring numerous threats to the conservation of resources.

Another phenomenon revealed in the conducted research is difficulties with the conversion of resources. Pierre Bourdieu paid particular attention to the importance of the conversion of resources (capitals). He claimed that the key to the understanding of actions of the individual, his sense of life satisfaction, is not so much the accumulation of capital, but its conversion, that is, the successful change of one capital into another. Symbolic capital, the social recognition, had a special status for Bourdieu. The successful conversion of, for example, cultural capital into economic capital, creates a sense of a meaningful experience of life, but only the conversion of economic, cultural or social capital into symbolic capital or social recognition confirms the right, fundamental meaning of existence.

Our research has confirmed the importance of resource conversion and increasing difficulties in achieving it when we look in a generational perspective. Ease of movement in both physical and digital space, communication technologies compressing time and space create a semblance of conversion rather than its performance at a

deeper, qualitative level. This is probably the phenomenon taking place on a more universal, global level, and our research is only an exemplification of it.

The question of high-quality mobility covers not only ways to deal with the unforeseen consequences of intentional actions, but also the already mentioned responses to random events, as the effects of climate change, other sudden security and comfort threats. An important factor in this process is therefore the resilience of a single human, family or local community to unforeseen events, the ability to restore balance, and further sustainable resource management. Keeping an interdependence between these factors seems equally important.

Among the factors that enable resilience, we can clearly identify the intergenerational way of reproducing resources, which we have called heterogeneous intergenerational reproduction of resources. It consists of combining an important resource located in the experience of the family of origin (e.g. a pattern of roles performed in the family by spouses-parents, children, grandparents - mutual respect, recognition of hierarchy determined by age), which is reproduced

(sometimes with modifications in the next generation) with a new resource: in this case it might be for example a new relationship between siblings – not present in the previous generation. The goal of having three children is still a natural one. In the previous generation, there were also three children, but in the same time an educational attempt is undertaken to modify the relationship between siblings, e.g. by eliminating or at least reducing the roles attributed to the sexes. It can also affect the gradual transformation of intergenerational relations.

We also asked the question to what extent high quality mobility must be (inevitably) related to spatial mobility - in this case shaping the valorization axis: a small city subject to devaluation opposed to the big city (in Poland or abroad). Translating this into our key concept -of high quality mobility: must satisfying acquisition and resource management mean migration from a small town? Does this axis change over time? Does the situation differ between the mid-1970s, the times when we start our study of school graduates, and a few years after Poland's accession to the European Union? Does this axis remain unchanged, or do some significant, qualitative changes occur? Do these changes move in the direction of the progressive devaluation of a small town in relation to the "big world", or are there any signs of its valorization? The sense of this valorization might be that the factors of the "big world" are easier to reach in a small town, e.g. by the presence of large retail chains, the emergence of creative and innovative start-ups, the dissemination of life patterns associated so far mainly with big cities; but also in the sense that valorization refers to features usually attributed to a small city, e.g. short distances, clean air, good quality of water, living close to nature. In both cases, however, the valorization axis does not change. Valorization and devaluation processes are based on the "traditional" opposition of a small town vs. "big world." At the same time, it is worth keeping analytical openness to other features, although up to date research does not indicate their presence. This is probably strongly related to deeply rooted local knowledge, in the sense given to this concept by Clifford Geertz. Local knowledge allows sustainable reproduction of the local socio-cultural structure, but it also limits possible innovations and introducing of new qualitative elements into the local social life.

These questions open the perspective not only to perceive the mobility of the inhabitants of a small town, but also to see the mobility of a small town itself. It is true that a small town does not change its geographical location in space, but it is also subject to the relational perception of social space, in which the position of a given object is defined by the position of other objects (in this case: other towns, other regions, countries and even continents). The mobility of a small town is determined by the interaction of the interrelated factors. The identification and detection of these interdependencies occurs to be one of the main research goals, leading also to the new view of social development in terms of social ecology.

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