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THE CONCEPT OF "OTHER" IN THE DESIDERATA OF CLIENTS  
OF A MATRIMONIAL AGENCY  
WOMEN IN SEARCH OF THEIR IDENTITY

The aim of this paper is to present a possibility of analysing macrostructural social problems in the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism. We shall make references to the notions of self-conception and social identity. The application of these concepts needs a brief commentary. It is widely known that the discussion of the theoretical status of notions like "social identity" or "self-conception" is connected with the essential split within symbolic interactionism. For the sake of brevity we should like to limit our remarks to methodological implications of the two orientations. For H. Blumer the self-consciousness of an individual is subject to constant interpretations. The attitudes of others toward the individual are exposed to constant redefinitions. Eventually, the object of sociological investigation is reduced to the "mechanism of the self" conceived as a process of internal conversation by the individual. For the followers of Blumer all efforts aiming at the description of some relatively stable, trans-situational structures in human personality are useless, because they fail to recognize the true nature of human subjectivity. It must be admitted that in this radical interpretation there is practically no place for social determinism (Z i ó k k o w s k i, 1981, p. 87). Conversely, the social determinism is emphasized in the Iowa School. In the formulations of M. Kuhn subjectivity is identified with a set of attitudes the most important of them are

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self-attitudes (K u h n, M c P a r t l a n d, 1954). From this point of view the self is treated as a structure-like entity.

The self-attitudes may be described and understood if we establish the influential others. While for Blumer the main object of investigation is the mechanism of the self, for Kuhn the point of interest is the biographic configuration of the relations of the individual with different kinds of others. The standpoints of both authors have important methodological consequences. A good case is provided by the analysis of the mechanisms of the self recommended by Blumer and by Kuhn's TST (and related approaches taken over from social psychology). It seems that the Blumerian and Kuhnian versions of symbolic interactionism are in many respects complementary. They point at two different aspects in the making of self-identity. Another instance is that of R. Turner who argues for distinguishing between the selves that reflect our various worlds and a "lasting self-conception" (T u r n e r, 1968, p. 100). In a similar way J. Charon points out that the best way is to define the social self as both a consistent self-conception and a series of situationally occasioned self-images (cf. C h a r o n, 1979, p. 69).

Together with other authors we are inclined to think that there exist different approaches permitting to reconstruct the self-conception of a social actor. Some of them exceed the TST in accuracy. It seems that different kinds of "personal documents" are of great value for a sociologist interested in these problems. We mean especially letters, memoirs, autobiographies produced in the crucial periods of both individual biographies and group life. This kind of data permits to reveal the cornerstones of one's sense of identity.

In this paper we should like to discuss some aspects of the social identities of men and women in Poland. The research evidence was drawn from letters of introduction sent to a matrimonial agency by its clients. These letters begin a new chapter in the lives of many clients of the agency by making them enter the matrimonial market. The exigencies of successful trade on this market presuppose the formulation of one's desiderata as well as of one's self-conception. Two conditions of the market (anonymity and a real and important task i.e. mate selection) compell the people to ascribe to themselves attributes commonly considered as "typi-

cal" features of genuine or authentic man or woman. The same perspective is taken in the case of the definition of a sought partner. In this way, it seems, the reports of clients reflect a sort of Durkheimian "collective representations" of both sexes. Why are we interested in the reconstruction of the social identities of men and women in Poland? In fact we are interested in the transformation of the social identity of the woman. We maintain that the recent changes in the social structure and the ways of life have greatly transformed the self-conceptions of women. It is also possible that these new self-conceptions are incompatible with the social reality. Briefly, we have expected that the new self-conceptions of women give them much more trouble than men's self-conceptions give to men.

As mentioned above the research material consisted of letters of introduction addressed to a matrimonial agency. Besides data indispensable for the routine activity of the agency (name, address etc.) the letters contained also the self-description of the client and the description of the sought partner. During three months (spring 1978) all initial letters sent to one of the matrimonial agencies in Łódź were collected (in sum 319 letters, 148 from women, 135 from men). From each letter we selected all expressions used by its author for self-description and for the description of the sought partner (categories used for the description of the physical appearance were excluded). After this initial elaboration we obtained four lists of expressions:

- self-descriptions by women,
- self-descriptions by men,
- descriptions of women as seen by men,
- descriptions of men as seen by women.

The lists were then internally ordered, i.e., transformed into a sort of vocabularies (with respect to the frequency of occurrence of categories). It is proper to add that the ordering of the lists was a relatively easy task because of a high degree of conventionality of the expressions used by clients. Almost 70% of the lists were composed of 25-30 categories. It should also be mentioned that in the data analysis we were interested primarily in the outlines of the main "semantic fields" or areas of description. In this way we tried to avoid the more detailed and thereby hazardous semantic interpretations of the expressions used by clients. We

were thus able to grasp the "dimensions" of both types of descriptions.

The findings of the research were as follows. Women pointed to "loneliness" in their autodescriptions. They emphasized very often that they were "home-birds" "interested in movies, theatre, music, tourism". The list of the most popular categories contains also "affection for children", "lack of bad habits (alcohol, smoking)", and "good and quiet nature". More interesting is the structure of the vocabulary of women's autodescriptions. In presenting themselves they wanted first of all to emphasize their vivid interests in leisure activities (reading, cinema, music, tourism). In the second place women presented their general personal traits (temper, traits manifested in the sphere of interpersonal contacts). The set of traits connected with the family and house-keeping should be located in the third place (about 20% of all expressions).

The autodescriptions of men display the following features:

- men concentrated first of all on their personal traits,
- they pointed to the lack of "bad habits",
- they mentioned very few home and family-centered properties,
- the interests in the sphere of leisure were marked residually:

In presenting the images of men women pointed to the following attributes:

- the psychological traits permitting them to maintain satisfactory ("frictionless") husband-wife relations: (quiet, honest, protective),
- the lack of "bad habits" (alcohol, smoking),
- a small part of expressions were connected directly with homelife,
- there were very few categories pointing to interests in leisuretime activities.

Finally, in presenting images of the sought women men pointed to the following attributes:

- as in the case of women, the most important were these categories which permitted satisfactory relations between husband and wife (quiet, sober-minded),
- in the second place they located traits essential for "the hearth" (thrifty, home-bird, affection for children),

- attention should be paid to the fact that men did not reveal any interests in the leisure activities and cultural aspirations of women.

These findings induce us to say a few words concerning the problem of transformation of the social identity of women in Poland. Our research apparently confirmed the assumption that the identity of women provokes tensions. Women experience the effects of "unfortunate socialization" much more than men (see Berges, L u c k m a n n, 1975). As we have seen, in their autodescriptions men made references to well established and socially accepted attributes. There is a coincidence between men's autodescriptions and the images of men as seen by women. This situation does not provoke "definitional" misunderstandings. As was pointed out above, in their self-conceptions men concentrated upon the description of their personal traits and on the lack of "bad habits". Very few indications concerned traits important for house-keeping. Men did not refer to leisure and cultural activities in their self-conceptions.

The image of men as presented by women contained psychological traits important for good familial relations and abstinence from alcoholic drinks. Attributes connected with house-keeping were of residual importance. Categories pointing to cultural aspirations and leisure activities were practically absent.

Women's self-conceptions and the descriptions of women presented by men were symptomatically divergent. In their self-conceptions women exposed first of all their interests and activities in the sphere of leisure and culture, next they presented general personal traits (not only traits important for family life) and finally attributes essential for house-keeping. On the other hand in their descriptions of women, men pointed first of all to the psychological attributes indispensable for maintaining good relations between husband and wife. Next, men pointed at attributes essential for housekeeping and (thirdly) were not interested at all in the most important part of women's self-conceptions, i.e. leisure and cultural aspirations.

We are then justified to assume that the reported divergencies can provoke tensions between the wives' self-conceptions and the expectations of the husbands.

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KONCEPCJA "INNEGO" W DEZYDERATACH KLIENTÓW  
BIURA MATRYMONIALNEGO

Autor artykułu koncentruje się na rekonstrukcji tożsamości społecznych kobiet i mężczyzn, klientów biura matrymonialnego. W analizie wykorzystano oferty kierowane do biura matrymonialnego. Stwierdzono istnienie rozbieżności między autodefinicjami kobiet a obrazem żony w dezyderatach mężczyzn.