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THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF QUESTIONNAIRE INTERVIEW

There are in sociology numerous models of the interview situation and of the role of the respondent. The American model, which functions in a context of almost completely acculturated interview techniques, has been created in a liberal-democratic society, and it assumes the respondent's strong motivation for giving "true" answers deriving from a belief in the usefulness of social studies and of the expression of one's own opinions. Such views are a constituent part of the role of a citizen in a "democracy through public opinion"<sup>1</sup> and a role of a consumer of goods and services.

The socialist model of the respondent, represented by Friedrich and Hennig in GDR or by various Soviet theories assumes that the respondent has a positive attitude towards the interview and is ready to express his opinions since social research contributes to the solution of social problems. According to these authors the interview unites both participants as partners in their efforts to improve social life. Both approaches presented above focus on the attitudes of a model citizen and a resulting positive perception of the purposes of social research<sup>2</sup>.

An entirely different situation has been described by Pasiak in his studies of Slovak peasant communities in which no model of

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<sup>1</sup> Z. G o s t k o w s k i, O założeniach i potrzebie badań nad technikami i procedurami badawczymi w socjologii, [in:] Analizy i próby technik badawczych w socjologii, vol. I, Ossolineum, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków 1966, p. 23-26.

<sup>2</sup> W. F r i e d r i c h, W. H e n n i g, Der Sozialwissenschaftliche Forschungsprozess, Berlin 1975, p. 380.

the respondent has been defined yet, and where the interview situation has not been culturally and socially accepted<sup>3</sup>.

Models of the respondent appeared also in Polish sociology but their assumptions were not parallel to those of Friedrich and Hennig. They referred to the respondents' mental reactions to survey questions and disregarded all motivational elements whose constituent part are their attitudes to social studies. It was probably due to some pragmatic reasons resulting from the fact that most people in this country did grant the interviews and the proportion of refusals was usually very small. Another reason could have been a realistic estimation of the possibilities of creating any models of the respondent in a socialist society, especially on the basis of such ideological elements as in Friedrich and Hennig.

The research of respondent's attitudes towards social studies dates back to the time when they were first initiated in this country. Their investigation has taken a double form. In some works it was aimed at defining attitudes towards sociology or social research exhibited by certain members of our society. More numerous investigations resulted from empirical research undertaken on the side of various studies conducted in a variety of social groups.

We shall start this discussion of the respondents' attitudes towards social research with a brief description of the concept of science, including sociology, which functions in our society. Data referring to the problem come from a study by Giza and Worotyńska of a 300-person sample, representative of the whole country. The research was conducted in 1979, after a period of intensive sociological exploration of the 70s. The authors have observed in the Polish society a specific perception of science. "SCIENCE is what refers to the study of space, the structure of atom, or the organs of human body". Considerably less frequent are opinions that SCIENCE studies "human characters"; the study of social life - alcoholism, prostitution, market supplies, or the work of the health service is not SCIENCE. Problems of social life are dealt with by the STATE and its specialized agencies - among them perhaps also sociology (like statistics), and maybe also some sociological institute (like GUS - Central Bureau of Statistics)<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> J. P a s i a k, Metodologiczne problemy wywiadów socjologicznych, [in:] Analizy i próby..., vol. IV, p. 136-137.

<sup>4</sup> K. W o r o t y Ń s k a, Społeczny kontekst badań ankietowych (unpublished manuscript, Warszawa 1980).

According to the results obtained by Lutyńska and Gostkowski, the knowledge of sociology as a science is determined by membership of a social group e.g. only 1/6 of the clerks interviewed in 1960 could give any answer (and even then not always to the point) to the question: What is sociology? A research by Gostkowski in 1961 showed a high degree of popularity of this science among people exhibiting active intellectual interests (readers of social and literary magazines), 91% of whom had completed their secondary education<sup>5</sup>. In spite of the probability that a rapid increase in the number of sociological studies, especially in the 70s, and the gradual popularization of sociology through presentation of its results in the mass media influenced the spread of knowledge about sociology in this society, the results obtained by Giza and Worotyńska are quite discouraging for sociologists active in the field of scientific research.

It is notable that Poles closely associate sociology and sociological research with the State, its institutions and the system of political power. As a result, questionnaire studies are treated not as means of data collection but as a tool in making decisions on social matters. Sociology supplies a rationale for these decisions or serves for their verification. It helps to evaluate the public feelings and reactions to actions taken by authorities. According to the authors "it was seldom possible to extract such definitions of questionnaire research in which respondents agreed to treat questionnaire as a scientific method. Yet, an acceptance of sociology as a science, or of the questionnaire as a scientific method of research is very uncomfortable for us, sociologists, and for our self-perception. The respondents tell us that »if sociology exists, it's got to do something, and questionnaire studies is precisely what it does«"<sup>6</sup>. According to Giza and Worotyńska the results of their research may point to a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness among people and institutions in the face of a disorganized, disorderly and inert state which creates an absurd net of institutions and positions whose only task

<sup>5</sup> K. L u t y ń s k a, Refleksje metodyczne o wywiadach z urzędnikami w Łodzi w latach 1960-1961, [in:] Analizy i próby..., vol. I, p. 224-256; Z. G o s t k o w s k i, Opinie o socjologii wśród inteligencji trzech środowisk kulturalnych, "Przegląd Socjologiczny" 1962, vol. XVI, no. 2, p. 100-124.

<sup>6</sup> W o r o t y ń s k a, op. cit.

is to exist. Sociology and agencies which practice it are such hopeless institutions, created because they have to exist also in this country, and having no practical role or task. They conduct questionnaire studies because they must do something in order to exist.

An analysis of numerous research results indicates that a positive or negative attitude of respondents to sociological studies is determined by evaluation of their practical applicability. Once introduced, a research should serve for some purpose; its task should be to induce changes aimed at improving social life, the material situation of people or their standard of living in general. The adoption of the criterion of applicability as an indicator of positive or negative attitudes of respondents towards the research remains in close connection with the acceptance of sociology, especially in its institutional aspect, as an element of the power system and decision making. It seems to be confirmed by the results of research that definite attitudes towards social studies are a function of respondents' convictions as to the possibility of positive changes in the mechanism of the society or in their personal situation. Of equal importance is whether the respondents believe in the possibility of changes or improvements resulting from decisions of authorities, and whether they believe that results of sociological research are considered in the process of decision making. In the light of available data such beliefs are "uncommon" among Polish respondents (to put it mildly). Their attitudes vacillate according to rapid turns in the official policy, which take place at every change of the power élite. A good example of a clearly positive attitude towards a research is provided by a survey referring to social and economic problems of farmers, conducted in December 1971 and in January 1972, following a governmentall bill abolishing compulsory supplies of farming produce and introducing a health insurance program for farmers. The interviewed farmers perceived the study as yet another element of the new agrarian policy of the State, and sometimes even as an opinion poll preceding further, beneficial changes<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> A. B o c s k o w s k i, Stosunek respondentów wiejskich do ankietarów i sytuacji społecznej wywiadu w świetle kontrolnej ankiety pocztowej, [in:] Z. G o s t k o w s k i (ed.), Z metodologii i metodyki socjologicznych badań terenowych, IFiS PAN, Warszawa 1973, p. 159.

It is obvious that besides applicability, people's attitudes towards sociology and social studies are based on some other criteria as well. In a research from 1964 Słomczyński noted that in the stratum of intelligentsia 50% of studied population defined sociology as an academic science whose sole purpose is to satisfy intellectual curiosity, and to form world-views for the use of men. This group of respondents were better disposed towards sociology than those who perceived it as a tool of social politics, yet they also denied it any practical value<sup>8</sup>.

Giza and Worotyńska argue that the criterion of applicability becomes especially valid whenever research deals with these social problems which come close to the respondent's experience (e.g. the work of a polyclinic, a housing project in the area etc.). On the other hand when research concentrated on attitudes, values or social structure in general, respondents reacted in three different ways. Most of them were convinced that it was aimed at verifying some basic tenets of the system or, even more frequently, at diagnosing global social problems. Respondents with such attitudes accept as proper the sponsor's intentions, fell favoured to be offered the role of "experts" and perceive the research as a potential tool of social change. They usually say the research could be useful, but "under present conditions" it is not.

Less frequent is a conviction that the research is statesponsored in order to check on the citizens' loyalty and to control their consciousness. "They've got to know even our thoughts" - says one respondent<sup>9</sup>. According to this view research questions are captious since through them the citizen is being forced to exhibit his true - disloyal - opinions.

The third view is least frequent of all. Those who express it treat the so-called basic sociological research as a study of human characters and categorize it together with psychological studies.

The last two variants contain certain phobic-genic elements: they are associated with a conviction that the interview is designed in order to find out some hidden features or opinions of the

<sup>8</sup> K. S ł o m c z y ń s k i, Wpływ oficjalnej i prywatnej sytuacji wywiadu na wypowiedzi respondentów w środowisku inteligencji, [in:] *Analizy i próby...*, vol. I.

<sup>9</sup> W ó r o t y ń s k a, op. cit.

respondent. These biased respondents try to discover what the authors call "a false bottom, a sphere of indefiniteness" which is connected with the interview situation and which makes them afraid of revealing their psyche, their ignorance, or -worse still- their opinions which might incriminate them in the face of the State.

Also other authors point to the element of apprehension in the respondents' attitudes towards social research. In a study by Lutyńska a group of clerks granted interviews with some reluctance and fear of negative consequences in their jobs, as well as an apprehension of sanctions of a "more general" social, political, or occupational character. Gostkowski observed similar attitudes among respondents coming from a small community and noted, that besides fear and apprehension resulting from ignorance of the purpose of study, or lack of culturally sanctioned social norms of behavior in the situation of interview a part of respondents treated the survey as "official registration constituting a threat to their well-being" (an increase in taxes, eviction etc.)<sup>10</sup>.

Under present circumstances it seems that this conviction of respondents that an expression of opinions is likely to bring sanctions from the part of some vaguely defined authorities is one of major problems for social researchers. Privately, people offer views which differ from those expressed in official situations (e.g. during an interview). This hypothesis is partly confirmed by the results of a study by Słomczyński in which an interviewer, who introduced herself as an agent of a state institution, asked questions related to the official ideology and thereby made her respondents define their role (more or less consciously) as citizens acting in the context of large social organizations<sup>11</sup>. During the interviews a part of respondents presented opinions which were closer to the official state line than views presented by them as member of informal groups.

It is thus natural to ask: How is it possible that interviews are granted at all in this society which is so unfamiliar with sociological research, in which (due to the lack of adequate cultural norms) respondents are unable to define their role correctly,

<sup>10</sup> Z. G o s t k o w s k i, Kontrola procesu badawczego w małej społeczności, [int.] Analizy i próby..., vol. III, p. 66.

<sup>11</sup> S ł o m c z y ń s k i, op. cit.

in which the purpose and character of research are misinterpreted, where there is hardly any conviction as to the use of such research (especially in respect to its application by authorities in order to improve social life), and in which granting an interview requires a suppression of fear or apprehension?

The following hypothesis may explain this seeming contradiction as well as the fact that the proportions of interview refusals are minimal in Polish surveys.

On the one hand it seems that respondents act according to a traditional and deeply internalized cultural norm requiring of them to be hospitable to everyone, including strangers, which makes them let the interviewer into their homes. On the other hand the interviewer is usually treated as a public officer, a representative of some state agency which constitutes a part of the power system. It is thus possible that fear of running into troubles or of being called to account for a refusal of interview dominates over the feeling of apprehension resulting from participation in the interview. It is also probable that this feeling of apprehension is partly neutralized by other psychological factors like curiosity of the new social situation (so far unrecorded by the respondent's experience), the impression of being favoured by the fact that some official, even scientific, institution asks him for information and treats him as an expert on social matters etc.

The above types of respondents' attitudes towards the sociological research are of definite consequence for the evaluation of research results. In surveys aimed at describing a broadly defined sociopolitical and economic situation of the country or the individual situation of the respondent against this broad background, respondents, let alone their informational incompetence, express "official" views, in agreement with currently accepted political line, expected by authorities and different from private opinions expressed during informal contacts. Equally disadvantageous from the point of view of results are cases in which respondents are not afraid of anything but supply answers in order to maintain the conversation since they are convinced that their opinions are of no practical importance with regard to possible changes in the conditions of life. We may thus say that the Polish respondent before 1980 was a man who easily granted interviews, but seldom met the requirements of a good interviewee.

The situation described above underwent a modification in the period of "Solidarity". On many occasions interviewers recorded opinions not in line with official views. We were obviously facing a retarded reaction to the previous blockade of possibilities for authentic expression. It might have been connected with a common, at that time, conviction that living conditions were going to improve, and that the common man would have some influence on the situation of his country. Accordingly, his views presented in an interview were to be taken into consideration in the process of decision-making.

It is worth recalling that in 1956 a similar hope for changes in the execution of political power and prospects for gradual democratization of social life and for free expression contributed to, and facilitated the introduction of opinion polls. Since then until 1980 the situation in which sociologists had to work fell short of those expectations. August 1980 made the way for free expression and revived the belief in usefulness of social research - a trend confirmed in all surveys in that period.

Martial law - as can be seen in reports from research done after December 13 - has not, so far, inhibited this spontaneity and openness of expression, as if in spite of present social and political situation. Meanwhile, the state authorities have created an Opinion Poll Center which is to supply information facilitating decisions on social and political matters. It is a new element in the system of Polish sociological institutions and it may play an important role in the formation of respondents' attitudes towards social research in this country.

The following hypotheses seem plausible in the light of what has been said here.

1. It is possible that changes which occurred after August 1980 and the resulting transformation of the society have penetrated deeply enough into the social consciousness as to promote further free expression of opinions regardless of political conditions.

2. A clear connection between social research and the power system (viz: the Opinion Poll Center mentioned above) may result in a return to, or even a growth of, attitudes characteristic of the period before August 1980, i.e. to presentation of public opinions reflecting the official political line.

3. It may bring about a decrease in the number of people granting interviews as a result of the growing popularity of a "model of refusal" (under the condition that refusal will not be followed by especially severe sanctions).

4. Finally, it is also possible that present drastic restriction of opportunities for self-expression will result in a treatment of the interview situation as the safest way of expressing one's thoughts, views and attitudes.

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#### SPOŁECZNY KONTEKST WYWIADU KWESTIONARIUSZOWEGO

Artykuł przedstawia społeczne wyznaczniki prowadzenia badań kwestionariuszowych w oparciu o wyniki sondaży przeprowadzonych na ten temat w ciągu ostatnich 20 lat. Na ich podstawie można stwierdzić, iż wiedza na temat badań społecznych jest zasadniczym czynnikiem wpływającym na wyniki badań kwestionariuszowych. W związku z tym badacz posługujący się tą techniką musi uwzględnić stopień jej akulturacji w danym społeczeństwie, jak również w różnych jego środowiskach.