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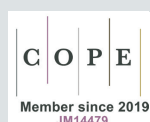
**Society and social issues as the subject
of researches and analysis of
sociologists of the young generation**

edited by

Jakub Ryszard Stempień



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IMMERSIVE VIRTUAL REALITY AS A SOCIAL RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT. THE IMPACT OF THE PRESENCE OF AN EMBODIED AGENT ON THE STROOP TASK PERFORMANCE BASED ON OWN RESEARCH¹

Abstract. This empirical study examined the effects of the presence of others (physical observers and embodied agents) on the performance of the Stroop task within an immersive virtual reality (VR) environment. Drawing from the research conducted by Pascal Huguet and his colleagues, who explored the social facilitation and inhibition effects in traditional lab conditions using the Stroop test, the current study sought to test these effects in VR conditions. Participants were divided into four groups, each experiencing different conditions – performing the task alone, under the awareness of being observed, or in the presence of embodied agents (formally dressed as Dr. Piotr or casually as Piotrek). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) for independent samples was conducted to evaluate the results. Findings showed a significant reduction in Stroop interference when participants were aware of being observed by the experimenter. However, the presence of embodied agents in the VR environment, regardless of their dress or manner of presentation, did not significantly influence the results. These results not only confirmed the occurrence of the Stroop interference effect in VR conditions, comparable to traditional lab conditions, but they also suggested that the social presence of the experimenter could enhance task performance in the VR environment.

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There was no significant influence observed from the presence of embodied agents, though. These observations can greatly contribute to the development of VR. However, further research is required to expand these findings, considering factors such as sample size and realism of embodied agents.

Keywords: Virtual reality, VR, immersive virtual reality, social facilitation, social inhibition, Stroop task, Stroop interference, embodied agent, social research.

IMMERSYJNA RZECZYWISTOŚĆ WIRTUALNA JAKO ŚRODOWISKO BADAŃ SPOŁECZNYCH. WPŁYW OBECNOŚCI UCIELEŚNIONEGO AGENTA NA POZIOM WYKONANIA ZADANIA STROOPA NA PODSTAWIE BADAŃ WŁASNYCH

Abstrakt: Badaniom poddany został wpływ obecności innych osób (fizycznego obserwatora i ucieleśnionych agentów) na wykonanie zadania Stroopa w immersyjnym środowisku wirtualnej rzeczywistości (VR). Opierając się na pracach przeprowadzonych przez Pascala Hugueta i współpracowników, którzy badali efekty facylitacji i hamowania społecznego w tradycyjnych warunkach laboratoryjnych za pomocą testu Stroopa, obecne badanie miało na celu przetestowanie tych efektów w warunkach VR. Uczestnicy zostali podzieleni na cztery grupy, z których każda przebadana była w innych warunkach – wykonując zadanie samodzielnie, ze świadomością bycia obserwowanym lub w obecności wcielonych agentów (formalnie ubranego dr Piotra lub nieformalnie Piotrka). W celu oceny wyników przeprowadzono jednoczynnikową analizę wariancji (ANOVA) dla niezależnych próbek. Wyniki wykazały znaczną redukcję interferencji Stroopa, gdy uczestnicy byli świadomi tego, że są obserwowani przez eksperymentatora. Jednak obecność ucieleśnionych agentów w środowisku VR, niezależnie od ich ubioru czy sposobu przedstawienia, nie wpłynęła znacząco na poziom wykonania zadania. Wyniki nie tylko potwierdziły występowanie efektu interferencji Stroopa w warunkach VR, porównaniu z tradycyjnymi warunkami laboratoryjnymi, ale także zasugerowały, że obecność społeczna eksperymentatora może poprawić wydajność wykonywania zadań w środowisku VR. Nie zaobserwowano jednak znaczącego wpływu obecności ucieleśnionego agenta. Obserwacje te mogą znacznie przyczynić się do rozwoju aplikacji VR. Jednak potrzebne są dalsze badania, w których uwzględnione zostaną takie czynniki, jak wielkość próby i realizm ucieleśnionych agentów.

Słowa kluczowe: rzeczywistość wirtualna, VR, immersyjna rzeczywistość wirtualna, facylitacja społeczna, hamowanie społeczne, zadanie Stroopa, interferencja Stroopa, ucieleśniony agent, badania społeczne.

1. Introduction

Virtual reality (VR) has been envisaged as an innovative communication medium since its inception, with the potential to radically alter the way humans interact (Oh et al. 2018: 1). Some VR pioneers envisioned it as the ultimate form of interaction between humans and machines, a medium that could liberate the human spirit (Biocca et al. 1995: 7). Others saw it as the first step towards the creation of an optimal communication medium. William Gibson described cyberspace as a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of authorized users (Gibson 1984: 51).

Despite conceptualizing VR as a social medium where individuals can coexist and interact, the earliest VR research focused on single-user systems using head-mounted displays (HMDs), generally restricted to laboratory settings. However, in recent years, VR technology has migrated, in various forms, to home environments. This increased accessibility, coupled with improved technical specifications and lower costs, has reignited interest in its social applications, evidenced by the launch of platforms such as AltSpace VR, Facebook Spaces (now Meta Horizon), and VR Chat (Oh et al. 2018: 1).

VR is believed to offer a significantly higher level of social presence compared to other technology-mediated communication forms – the subjective experience of being with a real person, gaining access to their thoughts and emotions (Biocca 1997). Through visual, auditory, tactile, and to a lesser extent, olfactory information, VR systems can provide a wide range of social cues. Consequently, it has been argued that it's critical to understand how various technology-related aspects of VR affect the perception and experience of social presence (Oh et al. 2013: 1).

The phenomenon of social facilitation in immersive virtual reality environments forms the core of this study. Social facilitation, or more broadly social facilitation and inhibition (SFI), is the simplest aspect of group activity, associated with the mere presence of others (Wojciszke 2002: 388). As demonstrated in the meta-analysis by F.C. Bond and L.J. Titus (Bond, Titus 1983: 265), social presence increases the speed of performing simple, well-learned tasks but slows the performance of poorly learned tasks.

This study aims to investigate the phenomenon of social facilitation and inhibition in immersive virtual reality. Two goals were established: 1) Determine the similarity between the impact of another human's presence and the influence of an embodied agent on task efficiency in immersive VR, and 2) Demonstrate the potential of immersive virtual reality systems as an environment for researching selected social behaviors.

2. Virtual reality as a laboratory for social science research

In the academic sphere, it is increasingly recognized that beyond the established position of Virtual Reality (VR) in diagnostics (psychiatric, psychological), or therapy, this technology can be successfully used as a tool for experimental research. The methodology based on VR solutions exhibits a multitude of advantages, especially in studies of psychopathological phenomena. These advantages include the realism of the environment, the ability to control a large number of variables while simultaneously providing precise and comprehensive response recording (neurological, physiological, self-reports, etc.), and the absence of the need to sacrifice external validity to achieve greater internal validity. As individuals are immersed in an environment that mirrors reality, simulating the environment

and tasks performed in the real world, the generalizability of results is enhanced (Baños et al. 1999: 283).

An important characteristic of VR is its capability to control social environments, which is regarded as one of the key variables, for example, in understanding psychosis. Freeman and colleagues (2010: 85) employed VR to study paranoid delusions, examining whether virtual avatars (computer-generated representations of people in virtual environments) are perceived as hostile. The work of Freeman and his team yielded satisfactory results and demonstrated that using VR as a research environment is feasible and safe for patients with psychotic disorders (Freeman et al. 2010: 89).

Botella et al. (2017: 575), citing Dunsmoor et al. and Shibana et al., note that using VR and virtual embodied agents in research involving social conditioning stimuli carries many benefits. VR-based environments can simulate social interaction much more effectively than traditional computer systems with a standard monitor. Moreover, the use of space and movement in VR enhances ecological validity, and participants' attention is concentrated on the experiment, not distracted by the laboratory or experimenter.

VR technology may also provide a useful way to conduct research that would be challenging to carry out in a real environment due to ethical considerations. For example, Slater and colleagues suggested that VR can be beneficial in any social and psychological study where, for safety or ethical reasons, it is not possible to place participants in the actual phenomenon to be studied. To illustrate this, the researchers employed VR to replicate Stanley Milgram's classic experiment on obedience to authority (Slater et al. 2006: 2).

3. Social facilitation and inhibition

Social facilitation and inhibition are phenomena related to the influence of others' presence on our behavior. These studies began in the 19th century with observations by Triplett (1983: 514), who noticed that cyclists racing against others achieved better results than cycling alone.

In the 1930s, Pessin and Husband demonstrated the existence of social inhibition or deterioration of performance in the presence of others. However, due to conflicting results, this problem was abandoned for nearly 30 years (Wojciszke 2002: 338).

The issue was revisited in the 1960s when Zajonc (1965: 270) tried to resolve these contradictions. He noticed that the presence of others facilitated the performance of simple tasks, but hindered the performance of complex tasks. He suggested that the mere presence of others was sufficient to cause social facilitation or inhibition effects (Zajonc 1965: 274).

According to Zajonc, the presence of others enhances arousal, which strengthens the tendency to perform the dominant reaction (Wojciszke 2002: 340). The presence

of others increases the likelihood of errors in difficult tasks and reduces it to easy ones, confirmed by a meta-analysis by Bond and Titus (Bond, Titus 1983: 265).

Alternative explanations of the social facilitation and inhibition effects are connected with the interpretation of the observer's behavior by the observed. Cottella's model of evaluation apprehension (1972, cited in Bond 1982: 1042) suggests that the effect of social facilitation is evoked by the presence of an evaluative observer, but the majority of empirical studies did not confirm this (Wojciszke 2002: 340).

Baron's attention distraction model postulates that the mere presence of others attracts attention and causes a conflict between focusing on the other person and the task. Baron (1986) indicates this conflict as a mediator of facilitation and inhibition effects.

4. The Stroop task in measuring social facilitation effects

As previously mentioned, models explaining the influence of the presence of others on task performance – Robert Zajonc's drive model and Robert Baron's attention model – predict that the presence of others enhances performance in easy tasks (social facilitation) and reduces it in challenging tasks (social inhibition). The differences between these models lie in the underlying psychological mechanisms that explain this relationship. Zajonc's model suggests that the differentiating factor between easy and difficult tasks is the accuracy of the dominant response to task stimuli. In contrast, Baron's model suggests the level of task performance depends on the amount of stimuli required to solve the task. The presence of others causes the cognitive load, which, for easy tasks, leads to an improvement in task performance, and for difficult tasks, to a decrease. As Wojciszke (2002: 391) observes, in nearly all previous research, the validity of both theoretical models has been confirmed. Easy tasks are characterized by both a small number of signals needed for their execution, and the correct response being the dominant one. On the other hand, difficult tasks involve a high amount of stimuli, and the dominant response is incorrect.

Charles F. Bond Jr. (1982: 1042) sought to disrupt this pattern in studies of the self-presentation model, explaining the social facilitation phenomenon. The author embedded easy elements in a difficult task and difficult elements in an easy task. According to the adopted model, the observer's presence hindered the learning of the simple elements present in the difficult task and facilitated the learning of difficult elements placed in the easy task (Bond 1982: 1048).

The Stroop test, however, is an example of a task where the incorrect response is dominant but requires taking into account a very small number of signals (Huguet et al. 1999: 1012). This test is a frequently used method for evaluating executive control through the so-called interference effect (Okuszek, Rutkowska 2013:

216). In the standard version of the Stroop task, subjects are presented with words denoting colors (e.g., green, red) printed in different colors. The sequence of words and colors is determined randomly, and the subjects are asked to name the color in which a given word is presented as quickly as possible (Vakil et al. 1996: 314). Successful performance of the Stroop test requires the ability to inhibit habitual reactions, which is associated with the activation of attention processes, cognitive plasticity (mainly selective functions), and effective control, allowing flexible adjustment to changing task rules and conditions (Tomaszewska et al. 2010: 35). The Stroop test is believed to be a measure of cognitive control over the disruptive influence of the automated reading reaction, hence it is also used to measure inhibition control in conflict situations (Jodzio 2008: 263). The interference effect is understood as the time measured by the prolongation of the reaction time to the color of a color-inconsistent word compared with the same reaction to the color of a color-consistent word (Śpiewak 1999: 130).

Relating the Stroop task to the phenomena of social facilitation and inhibition, the dominant response in this task is processing the word content, which causes the interference effect, understood as a decrease in the speed of color recognition due to the word's content (which indicates a different color). However, this is an incorrect response, as the task involves identifying the color, not recognizing the word's content.

According to Zajonc's theory, it is a difficult task, as the presence of others should decrease performance. Conversely, according to Baron's theory, it is an easy task, as there are only two signals, one of which (the word's meaning) is irrelevant. From the perspective of this theory, the presence of others should enhance performance, as the narrowing of attention leads to ignoring the irrelevant signal (Wojciszke 2002: 392).

5. Methods

The research methodology that was used in this work, similar to the studies of Pascal Huguet and colleagues (Huguet et al. 1999: 1011), was based on the Stroop task. These researchers showed that the presence of others leads to an increase in the Stroop task performance level (decrease in interference values), meaning that ignoring word content was facilitated. These results are consistent with the model adopted by Baron but are difficult to explain by Zajonc's model, even though the latter is widely accepted (Huguet et al. 1999: 1011).

Similar conclusions (with some limitations) to those of Huguet and colleagues (Huguet et al., 1999: 1019) were reached by the author of this work, transferring the study of social facilitation to the virtual reality environment.

The study conducted as part of this research aimed to determine the level of social facilitation occurring in the immersive virtual reality experimental conditions

using the Stroop test. The role of the facilitator was performed by the experimenter and a virtual, embodied agent. Simultaneously, an attempt was made to relate the obtained results to the findings of previous studies by other authors carried out in real (non-virtual) conditions. This was aimed at identifying potential prospects for the application of immersive virtual reality technology as an environment for selected social research.

The study included 64 participants (42 women), comprised of employees from a manufacturing plant (40 individuals) and acquaintances of the study's author. The participant sample spanned a wide age range from 19 to 65 years and a variety of professional roles. A precondition for participation in the study was the absence of vision disorders, such as color blindness. Each participant was randomly assigned to one of four groups, each corresponding to a different type of social presence (levels of the study). The participants provided written consent to participate in the study using VR technology.

Following the study's assumptions, participants were divided into 4 groups. To achieve an equal number of women and men in each group, randomization was performed separately for each gender.

For the study, in Unreal Engine 4.7 was created a computer program was installed and run on Oculus Quest 2 virtual reality goggles. Figure 1 shows an examination using goggles Oculus 2.



Figure 1. Examination using the Oculus Quest 2 VR device

Source: own study

The independent variables – factors – measured on the nominal scale (Grzeszkiewicz-Radulska et al. 2020: 104) that were present in the study belonged to the following groups:

The first group. The type of social presence simulated during the study. This factor had the following values (levels):

- Level 1 – the task was performed alone, and there were no characters in the virtual environment.

- Level 2 – there were no characters in the virtual environment, but the participant was informed that the researcher would observe the study on a monitor duplicating the participant’s point of view.
- Level 3 – an avatar dressed in sportswear, whose gaze was directed at the participant, was present in the participant’s field of view in the three-dimensional virtual reality environment.
- Level 4 – an avatar dressed in a white shirt, whose gaze was directed at the participant, was present in the participant’s field of view in the three-dimensional virtual reality environment.

The second group. The color inconsistency of the displayed images. In this group of factors, there were two levels: 1) A colored control pattern in the form of a “+” character string of varying length was displayed (consistent displays); 2) A word was displayed, the meaning of which was not consistent with the color in which it was presented (e.g., the word BLUE displayed in red, or SUN in green).

During the study, three dependent variables were measured. The first dependent variable was the reaction time to the stimulus – the delay in milliseconds between the start of displaying the colored word or the control string of the Stroop test and the moment the participant pressed any virtual button (quantitative variable). The difference between the average reaction time to color-inconsistent words and the average reaction time to control signs was the Stroop interference – this was the second dependent variable (also quantitative).

The third dependent variable was the correctness of the response, i.e., the consistency of the displayed color with the pressed corresponding button. The number of correct answers given by the participant divided by the number of displays represented the correctness coefficient of the answers.

Task performance was understood as (determined independently): A smaller Stroop interference effect – a higher level of task performance. The level of response correctness – expressed by the correctness coefficient – a higher coefficient indicated a higher level of task performance.

Three versions of the program were developed, differing from each other in the presence/absence of a virtual agent, as well as its appearance and representation. Each group was tested using a specific version of the program. Thus, Group 1 and Group 2 performed the primary test without the presence of an agent, group 3 with the presence of the agent ‘Piotrek’, and Group 4 with the presence of the agent ‘Dr. Piotr’.

Every participant in the study, regardless of the group they belonged to, went through three levels (parts) of the program.

Introduction Level. The purpose of the first level was to enable the test subject to adapt to the new situation of experiencing immersive virtual reality, as well as to present basic information regarding VR technology and the hand motion tracking system. The virtual scenery of the introduction level was organized in a minimalist way, allowing however to capture the spatial relations characteristic of virtual reality.

At this stage, information regarding the purpose and course of the study, as well as the possibility of interrupting it at any time, was also conveyed to the participant. The readiness to proceed to the next level had to be confirmed by the participant in an interactive way – by pressing a virtual button. All information at the introduction level, as well as on the next two levels, was delivered verbally. Figure 1 presents the scenery of the first (introduction) level.

Training Level. The intent of this stage was to uniformly and thoroughly explain the role assigned to the study participant. Simultaneously, this level served as practical preparation for performing the Stroop test in a virtual environment. An assumed, hypothetical effect of the participant going through the training level was to compensate for any psychomotor differences (e.g., the time needed to acquire specific manual skills in a VR environment) that could disrupt the study results.

Upon completing the introductory level, the participant was transferred to the training level. The starting point, which is the place in the virtual space from where the participant begins to observe the scenery, was located in a way that allowed observation of a significant part of the room. The height of the observation point was determined automatically and reflected the current distance between the participant's eye level and the real floor level. The location of the interactive elements (buttons and board) was determined in a similar way – it considered the participant's line of sight and the reach of their hands.

The training level was divided into two parts: informative and practical. In the first part, virtual buttons and a board were introduced, on which the words and control signs of the Stroop test were displayed.

The participant was informed through verbal messages about the task at hand (they are supposed to press one of the buttons “R”, “G”, “B”, “Y” – corresponding to the color of the displayed image). They were then informed about the three practical training series that awaited them. During each series, 20 so-called frames (color words or sequences of “x” characters) were displayed, and each subsequent cycle had an increased level of difficulty. At the beginning of the training cycle, the displayed image only disappeared after pressing a button, while incorrect responses were corrected with a voice message. In the second training series, verbal cues were retained, but the display time was shortened to 700ms, and the rhythm of frame changes was set to 3500ms. The third series had the same time parameters as the proper test at the third level, i.e., the frame display time was 300ms, rhythmically every 2000ms, and voice messages were also disabled. In the training module, only color-neutral words (e.g. “bench”, “idea”) were displayed on a gray background in one of the four colors used in the Stroop task (blue, green, red, yellow).

After going through the three training series, the participant was notified that they would soon be redirected to the main task. At this point, if the version for group 3 or group 4 is launched, verbal information appears about the presence of a virtual agent during the test.

Depending on which group a given person was assigned to – one of the program variants was launched during the study:

- Version A – no embodied agent or avatar was present in the virtual room while performing the Stroop task (Group 1 and 2).
- Version B – an embodied agent was present in the room, watching the participant – the agent was introduced as Doctor Piotr and was dressed in a white shirt (Group 3).
- Version C – an embodied agent was present in the room, watching the participant – agent was introduced as Peter and was dressed in sportswear (Group 4).

After completing the second level, the **third level** was launched. When the participant confirmed their readiness to begin the task by pressing any button, the display of the test frames began. Exposed at a tempo (300ms display, rhythm 2000ms) were words associated with colors (e.g., “blood”) or denoting colors (blue, green, red, yellow) in a color inconsistent with the word’s meaning. Control positions were displayed with sequences of “+” characters of various lengths, in one of the aforementioned colors. Each element was displayed twice, equating to 80 test displays (frames) (2 x 20 words and 2 x control sequences). During the actual test, the time between the start of the display of a colored word or sequence of colored “+” characters and the pressing of the virtual button (reaction time) was measured. The recording of the reaction time took place automatically during the task in a text file, along with a timestamp and the parameters of the given word or control sequence. Figure 2 shows the third level with embodied agent Dr. Piotr.



Figure 2. Scenery of the third level (agent Dr. Piotr)

Source: own study

To answer the research questions posed, the data obtained were subjected to statistical analysis.

The average values of dependent variables (reaction time to control signs, reaction time to color-inconsistent words, Stroop interference, accuracy rate) obtained during the study for different groups are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Average of dependent variables obtained during the study

	Variables			
	Display time – control sign	Display time – incoherent words	Stroop Interference	Accuracy rate
The task performed in solitude	1101	1199	98,3	0,983
The examiner monitors the screen	1156	1171	15,5	0,853
In the field of view is Agent Dr. Piotr	1090	1146	56,6	0,875
In the field of view is Agent Piotrek	1116	1195	79,4	0,898

Source: own study

The data obtained in all groups were characterized by a longer reaction time to the display of color-inconsistent words compared to the reaction time to the display of control signs, indicating the occurrence of the Stroop interference effect. This effect was greatest in Group 2 (members were informed that the experimenter was observing their actions in virtual reality on a cloned monitor during the Stroop test), and smallest in Group 1 (the task was performed in solitude, i.e., the experimenter ensured that he was not observing the subjects in virtual reality and there was no virtual figure in the VR field of view).

In Group 3, where there was a virtual agent dressed in a white shirt and introduced as Dr. Piotr in the VR field of view during the study, the interference effect was larger than in Group 4, where the virtual agent present was dressed in a sporty sweatshirt and introduced as Piotrek.

At the same time, Group 2 observed a longer reaction time (compared to the other groups) to the display of control signs with a similar reaction time to the display of color-inconsistent words as in other groups.

The average values of the accuracy rate (a higher value of the rate indicates fewer mistakes made in color designation during the test) fell within a relatively narrow range – between 0.983 (Group 1) and 0.853 (Group 2). Fewer mistakes were also made in Group 4 (0.898) compared to Group 3 (0.875).

Using statistical methods: mixed ANOVA, one-way ANOVA, and contrast analysis (Grzeszkiewicz-Radulska et al. 2020: 104; Sosnowski 2004: 370), hypotheses were tested and verified.

To test Hypothesis 1, asserting the occurrence of interference effects (measured in milliseconds of statistically significant differences in reaction times to the control signs displays and color-inconsistent words) in individuals performing the Stroop task in immersive virtual reality conditions, a mixed ANOVA method was used.

The within-subject factor was the reaction time measurement (control displays, color-inconsistent words displays), while the between-subject factor was the group (4 levels: solitary task performance, experimenter watching the monitor screen, presence of an agent introduced as Dr. Piotr agent, presence of an agent introduced as Piotrek).

The analysis revealed significant differences between the measurements – the main effect of measurement was statistically significant: $F(1,60) = 89.86$; $p < 0.01$; $\eta^2 p = 0.6$. Bonferroni post-hoc tests showed statistically significant differences between the reaction time measurement for color-inconsistent word displays and control sign displays: mean difference = 62.00; $p < 0.01$. Bonferroni post-hoc tests considering time and groups demonstrated statistically significant differences between reaction time measurement for color-inconsistent word displays and control sign displays in Group 1: mean difference = 97.8; $p = 0.02$, in Group 3: mean difference = 56.0; $p < 0.01$, and in Group 4: mean difference = 79.3; $p < 0.01$. For Group 4, no statistically significant differences were demonstrated. There were also no statistically significant inter-group differences: $F(3,60) = 0.560$; $p = 0.643$. However, the interaction effect of factors proved significant: $F(3,60) = 7.43$; $p < 0.01$; $\eta^2 p = 0.271$.

To test Hypotheses 2, 3, and 4, which postulated a significant effect of others' presence (the awareness of being observed, the presence of embodied agent Dr. Piotr or agent Piotrek in the visual field) on decreasing the Stroop interference (expressed in ms) during the Stroop task performance in immersive virtual reality, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) for independent samples was conducted. The analysis showed that the compared groups significantly differed from each other. This indicates that the presence of others (either a person observing the task performance on a monitor or an embodied agent) influences the Stroop interference during the test in an immersive virtual reality environment, $F(3,60) = 7.35$; $p < 0.001$; $\eta^2 = 0.26$.

The result indicated that at least one group statistically significantly differed from the others.

Subsequently, under Hypotheses 2–4, a procedure involving the analysis of selected planned contrasts (a priori contrasts) was applied. Three contrasts were defined.

The analysis of contrast 1 showed that groups 1 and 2 differed significantly from each other: $F(1,60) = 17.018$; $p < 0.001$. The results showed that Group 2, which performed the Stroop task with the awareness that the experimenter was observing the test process from the perspective of the subject (on a cloned monitor), had a lower level of Stroop interference than the group performing the task in solitude (the difference in averages was 93.9ms). This allowed for the acceptance of the hypothesis about the influence of the awareness of being observed during the Stroop task in immersive virtual reality on the reduction of interference value.

The results obtained for contrast 2 and contrast 3 did not confirm the existence of statistically significant differences (respectively: $p = 0.401$, $p = 0.225$), therefore

it was necessary to reject Hypothesis 3, which postulated that the presence of an embodied agent in the subject's visual field reduces the interference value during the Stroop task in immersive virtual reality compared to the situation when the task was performed in solitude. Hypothesis 4, which postulated that the appearance and presentation manner of the virtual agent (formal attire, presented as Dr. Piotr vs. sportswear, presented as Piotrek) influence the reduction of Stroop interference, also did not receive confirmation.

Testing Hypothesis 5, postulating the effect of others' presence on the number of errors in color recognition during the Stroop task in virtual reality, using a one-way ANOVA, showed no significant differences between groups: $F(3.60) = 1.27$; $p < 0.291$. This suggests the lack of influence of others' presence (either an observer or an embodied agent) on correct color recognition in the Stroop test.

The statistical analysis conducted in this study confirmed Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2. However, Hypotheses 3, 4, and 5 did not receive confirmation. Therefore, the obtained results allow us to assume that during the performance of the Stroop task in the immersive virtual reality environment, the interference effect occurred, just like in classic (non-virtual) laboratory conditions.

There was also a statistically significant reduction in the interference value in the situation where the subject performed the Stroop test with the awareness of being observed in virtual reality by the examiner. No such influence was observed when an embodied agent was introduced into the subject's field of vision. The manner of dressing and the introduction of the agent also did not have a significant impact.

The statistically significant influence of the presence of an agent or the awareness of being observed on the degree of correct color recognition in the Stroop test in virtual reality was not confirmed either.

6. Conclusions and discussion

The following conclusions emerge from the empirical research conducted in this study. First, during the performance of the Stroop task in immersive virtual reality, the interference effect occurred, just as it happens in real (non-virtual) laboratory conditions. Statistically significant prolongation of the reaction time, which consisted of determining the color of the displayed word whose color was inconsistent with its meaning, was observed in the studied groups compared to the time of a similar reaction to the display of color control signs (+++++). This means that this study constitutes a significant premise for designing and further testing tools based on immersive VR technology – both implementing the Stroop task and other research techniques.

Secondly, the influence of social presence on improving the effectiveness of the Stroop task performance was observed in the immersive virtual reality environment. A statistically significant reduction in inference values was obtained in the group of

people performing the Stroop test with the awareness of being observed in virtual reality by the examiner, compared to the group performing the task in solitude (the examiner did not observe the actions of the subject in VR on the monitor, no computer-generated character is in the field of view).

However, no significant reduction in interference values was observed in groups where an embodied agent was present in the field of vision during the task. The agent's dress and manner of presentation also had no impact. This means that only one of the detailed hypotheses, stating the improvement in the effectiveness of performing the Stroop task in immersive virtual reality due to the presence of others, was confirmed. This hypothesis also referred to the presence of a real person (the examiner).

Therefore, the main hypothesis stating that the presence of an embodied agent affects the level of Stroop task performance in an immersive virtual reality environment in the same way as the real presence of the experimenter in the study conducted under laboratory conditions by Pascal Huguet and his colleagues was not confirmed.

However, the analysis of the obtained results at the descriptive level may shed some light. The average Stroop interference values obtained in each group are presented in Chart 1 (error bars represent 95% confidence intervals).

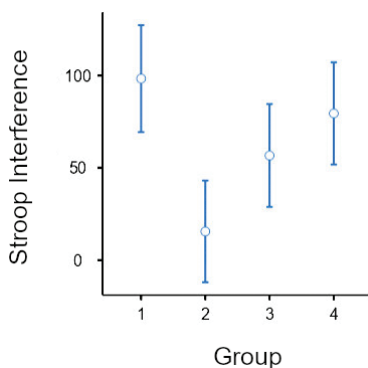


Chart 1. Average Stroop interference values obtained in each group

Source: own study

In addition to the statistically significant difference in average interference values, observed between Groups 1 and 2, there is a decrease in these values in Groups 3 and 4 compared to Group 1. At the same time, the average interference value in Group 3 is lower than in Group 4. This means that there were trends (not statistically significant) consistent with the assumptions underlying the research questions and hypotheses formulated in this study.

Similarly, when analyzing the average correctness coefficient values, it can be noticed that the most mistakes in determining the displayed color were made in

Group 2 and the fewest in Group 1 and Group 4. These averages are presented in Chart 2 (error bars represent 95% confidence intervals).

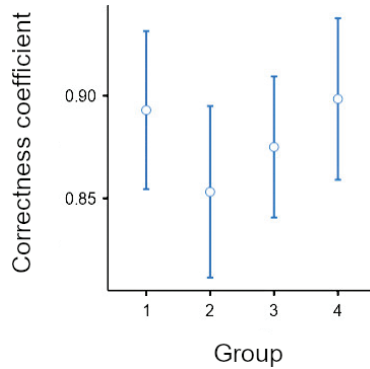


Chart 2. Average correctness coefficients obtained in each group

Source: own study

The observed trend was consistent with the findings of Huguet and colleagues (Huguet et al. 1999: 1016), who also noted a descriptive level decrease in the correctness coefficient in the presence of another person compared to the situation when the Stroop task was performed in solitude.

The lack of statistically significant results confirming Hypotheses 3 and 4 could be due to many reasons. One of the main issues was the sample size. As per the assumptions, the study was to be conducted on 4 levels, which required the division of the subjects into 4 groups, significantly reducing the size of each group (16 people). The characteristics of the tool itself could also have influenced the study results – primarily the realism of the embodied agent’s appearance and behavior. The extent to which the agent resembles a real figure is largely limited by the device’s technical parameters. The naturalness of the computer character’s behavior is a derivative of the workshop engaged to prepare the program (individually developed animation, AI-driven responsiveness). In this study, the agent’s behavior realism was not high (simulation “free posture” used in computer games) – it can therefore be cautiously speculated that more natural and responsive agent behavior would affect the facilitation effect’s strength.

An interesting issue that emerged after the results analysis is the answer to the question: what impact would presenting a computer character as an avatar and informing the subject that from this character’s perspective, another real user is observing their action, have on the Stroop task performance level? The subject would be visible in virtual reality as an avatar, as would the observer. Therefore, it can be assumed that there would be an interaction between real people hidden behind avatars. Should we expect a stronger social facilitation effect in such a situation than the embodied agent’s effect? The study conducted within this work indirectly

points to this possibility – the examiner in Group 2 served as an observer in virtual reality and although not visible, the mere awareness of this presence had a significant impact on the task performance level.

The continuous presence of VR technology in daily life, education, medicine, and research is a given. Despite current ergonomic challenges, it's expected that future advancements will enhance user comfort. VR's attractiveness extends beyond user experience, as it provides a vast data pool for network solutions. However, there are potential risks concerning data use for coercion, behavioral modeling, and surveillance (Brzezińska 2020: 33).

VR already plays a significant role in fields such as education, medicine, and research. It's important to note that research using VR also significantly contributes to the technology's development. Understanding how embodied agents or avatars affect task performance in VR can be valuable for designers of VR applications, including games, social services, education, and medicine.

This study, while not yielding unequivocal results, provides useful insights for future research and VR application design. It confirmed the possibility of creating a VR diagnostic tool equivalent to the traditional Stroop task. Moreover, it showed the Stroop interference effect occurs in immersive VR conditions. This can open up numerous research opportunities that would be impossible or difficult in conventional laboratory conditions.

The study also examined social facilitation and inhibition in VR environments, finding that awareness of being observed reduced the interference effect. The presence of an embodied agent only resulted in a non-significant descriptive reduction in interference values. Further research is needed in this area.

VR technology is still in its early stages of application in science and other non-entertainment areas. As VR technology advances, its potential applications will undoubtedly become apparent. Its ultimate use and development will rely heavily on multidisciplinary researchers working with this technology, including social scientists.

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CONSTRUCTING MEMORY IN URBAN SPACE: CASE OF THE BAŁUTY DISTRICT IN ŁÓDŹ¹

Abstract. In my article, I focus on the issue of constructing memory in urban space, taking a selected fragment of Łódź as an example. I discuss the chosen perspectives of researchers dealing with memory and the city; both of these topics have been covered by numerous studies in the social sciences. I conducted my research according to the procedures of visual grounded theory. The result of the analysis is discussed by presenting the main categories of the theory developed and the hypotheses to which the research process led me. I propose to locate the process of constructing memory in urban space between the memoryscape, which consists of all material and symbolic representations related to the past of a given place, and the experience of an individual who, as an active subject, perceives and interprets what is around them and, on this basis, takes certain actions.

Keywords: memory, Łódź, urban studies, visual sociology, visual grounded theory.

KONSTRUOWANIE PAMIĘCI W PRZESTRZENI MIEJSKIEJ: PRZYPADEK DZIELNICY BAŁUTY W ŁODZI

Abstrakt. W swoim artykule pochylam się nad tematem konstruowania pamięci w przestrzeni miasta, omówionego na przykładzie wybranego fragmentu Łodzi. Omawiam wybrane stanowiska badaczy zajmujących się pamięcią i miastem; oba z tych tematów doczekały się licznych opracowań w naukach społecznych. Własne badanie przeprowadziłem zgodnie z procedurami wizualnej teorii ugruntowanej.

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¹ This article is based on my Master's thesis "*Konstruowanie pamięci w przestrzeni łódzkich Bałut. Analiza socjologiczna*" ("Constructing memory in the space of the Bałuty district in Łódź. Sociological analysis") prepared under the supervision of Professor Krzysztof T. Konecki at the University of Lodz. The thesis was awarded in the Krystyna and Jan Lutyński competition (under the auspices of the University of Lodz) and the Florian Znaniński competition (under the auspices of the Polish Sociological Association).

Rezultat analizy opisuję, prezentując główne kategorie opracowanej teorii oraz hipotezy, do których doprowadził mnie proces badawczy. Proponuję, by lokować proces konstruowania pamięci w przestrzeni miasta między krajobrazem pamięci, na który składa się ogół symbolicznych reprezentacji związanych z przeszłością danego miejsca oraz doświadczeniem jednostki, która jako czynny podmiot odbiera i interpretuje to, co znajduje się wokół niej oraz na tej podstawie podejmuje określone działania.

Słowa kluczowe: pamięć, Łódź, badania miejskie, socjologia wizualna, wizualna teoria ugruntowana.

1. Introduction: the memory phenomenon

The origins of the growing interest in the past, which brings together researchers reflecting on memory, date back to the 1970s and 1980s. This interest has led to many diagnoses and proposed terms to describe it. Many of these, as Sharon Macdonald (2013: 3–4) notes, stem from negatively charged and/or medical language (e.g. memory mania, the memory craze, commemorative fever). For this reason, the anthropologist leans towards the more neutral expression “memory phenomenon”. This phenomenon can be explained by the changes in the postmodern world and the accompanying sense of uprooting, confusion about constructed identities, the change in attitude towards time and the disruption of its linear perception, and the emergence of the memory of minority groups (Szacka 2006: 46–47). The turn to the past can also be explained by the presence of certain unprocessed social traumas. In Europe, the events of the Second World War constitute such a trauma. These experiences form the foundation for the memory of the entire continent. It is a diverse memory, full of controversies, unresolved issues, and points of contention, but it nevertheless constitutes the most general common frame of reference (Bednarek 2012: 6).

In this article, I am primarily interested in identifying the memory phenomenon at the local level. I focus my attention on Łódź – nowadays the fourth most populated Polish city, after Warszawa, Kraków, and Wrocław, which recently jumped into the third spot. Today’s position of Łódź results from relatively recent developments. The town was granted city rights in the 15th century, but its greatest growth occurred in the 19th and 20th centuries, primarily due to its role as a center of the textile industry. With its industrial history and later post-industrial trajectory, Łódź can be compared to such cities as Manchester, Detroit, or Tampere. The period of the Second World War was probably the most tragic in the history of Łódź. During that time the ghetto operated in Łódź, which was the second largest ghetto in the German-occupied areas. The area of the former ghetto belongs to the part of Łódź that is today called the Bałuty district.

When we look at historical or literary descriptions of Bałuty, war history seems to be omnipresent there. However, how is the memory of this and other fragments of history constructed in the space of Bałuty itself? What elements make

up the local landscape of memory and how is it experienced by the individual? These are the questions that I seek to answer in my study. Delving into the description of the method and results of the study first requires one to point out the main sources of inspiration from the fields of memory and urban studies.

2. Memory and the city in sociological reflection

Concepts of memory from the social sciences can be presented in reference to the individual-collective opposition. The individual perspective accompanies studies of memory from the field of cognitive psychology and psychoanalysis (Zerubavel 1996: 283–284), studies of memory as an individual's attitude toward the past (Malicki 2012; Gubała-Czyżewska 2018), and studies involving the biographical method (Kaźmierska 2008). The issue of the past in the life of an individual can also be considered from the perspective of symbolic interactionism. Herbert Blumer, one of the founders of this theory, sensitizes researchers to the historical connections of what becomes the object of analysis, since “[t]he designations and interpretations through which people form and maintain their organized relations are always in degree a carry-over from the past” (Blumer 1986: 60).

So, is there anything more individual than remembering, an activity performed through the individual's thoughts and actions, we might ask after Jeffrey K. Olick (2008: 152). The answer can be found in the classic “*Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*” by Maurice Halbwachs (1969). The analysis of the titular framework is based on the assumption that the study of memory “is not a matter of reflecting philosophically on inherent properties of the subjective mind but of identifying its shifting social frames” (Olick 2008: 155). According to the French sociologist's concept, society provides the individual and their memories with a temporal and spatial framework. Halbwachs' work inspired later generations of researchers. One of the continuators of his thought was Georges Gurvitch, the author of the thesis on the multiplicity of social times. According to it, there is no single social time, nor is there a single collective memory. The multiplicity of memories is the multiplicity of values, attitudes, and interpretations. It is also the multiplicity of actors whose memories complement or come into conflict (Tarkowska 2016: 127).

There are plenty of inspirations for the study of tradition, historical awareness, and collective memory in the Polish social sciences. An important figure for this thought is Stefan Czarnowski. Although he does not usually use the term memory explicitly, he develops many valuable threads for its study. In an unfinished article, Czarnowski remarks that time in society is not an objective category and that understanding the past exclusively as an unambiguous, irreversible, and unrepeatable sequence of time is deceptive (Czarnowski 1956). Other Polish scholars focusing on the presence of the past in present life include Ludwik Krzywicki, Florian Znaniecki, and Stanisław Ossowski.

The meaning of the term “collective memory” and related categories depend on the approach of researchers representing various disciplines and scientific traditions, as well as the topic of research, which often focuses on a selected aspect of collective memory. Delving into terminological issues would require separate coverage. Among the concepts present in Polish sociology, I can mention collective memory (Szacka 2006: 19), social memory (Golka 2009: 15), or cultural and communicative memory (Assmann 2011: 5–10). I would also like to mention Eviatar Zerubavel’s (1996; 2003) concept of memory, which influenced me considerably.

Having concluded these brief reflections on memory, I would like to review selected perspectives on the sociology of the city. Of the most influential currents in urban sociology (Jałowiecki, Szczepański 2006: 13–41), I distinguish those most relevant to my work: the ecological and neo-ecological school, the culturalist school, and the humanistic schools.

The city in ecological perspective was one of the main objects of interest of the Chicago school, centered around Robert E. Park. Its members viewed the city as a laboratory of social life, assuming that the key problems of their contemporary society could be explained regarding urban life. Influenced by criticism and polemics, many of the assumptions of the Chicago school were reformulated, resulting in the formation of the neo-ecological school. Its origins date back to the proposals of Louis Wirth, Park’s seminarian. One of the Polish representatives of the neo-ecological school is Waław Piotrowski, author of the study of the sociospatial structure of Łódź (Piotrowski 1966).

The culturalist approach which rejected the naturalism of the Chicago school can be presented through the ideas of one of its founders, Florian Znaniecki. According to his proposal, individuals are not subject to spatial conditions involuntarily, but actively experience and evaluate numerous, changing, limited, and indivisible spaces. Znaniecki postulates using the concept of “spatial values” (*wartości przestrzenne*) to describe them. This category also includes the outside: surroundings, centers, borders, sides and directions, distances and proximities, roads and roadless areas (I believe one can see here the influence of Stefan Czarnowski’s thought, see Czarnowski 1939). Each of these values, as Znaniecki (1938: 91) states, is a component of some non-spatial system of values, in relation to which it has a particular substance and meaning. Florian Znaniecki’s continuators were, among others, Janusz Ziółkowski and Aleksander Wallis.

The humanistic schools in urban sociology are very diverse. They largely refer to the sociology of everyday life and the semiotic approaches. In the research on everyday life, the focus is on practices concerning the body, work, consumption, leisure, and customs, among others. These practices occur in specific spaces that we can call places of everyday life (one of which is the public space). As Marek Krajewski (2009: 182) notes, these are places to which the individual returns and which they treat as their own.

The city can be perceived either as a text or as a non-linguistic sign system, as scholars from the semiotic movement tend to do. For a long time, reading the city

was a widely used metaphor for the reception of urban space. However, the textualist paradigm in thinking about culture may be considered an oversimplification (Rewers 2005: 33). Given the above, it is possible to consider urban space in terms of the signs and traces that coexist within it. While the sign has a representational structure, the trace is surrounded by a mystery that is difficult to grasp. The trace can only be expressed by the movement of presence and absence, manifestation and mystery, representation and its absence (Rewers 2005: 26). According to such reasoning, the city would constitute a hybrid space, both semiotic (texts) and palimpsestic (traces). A palimpsest is a configuration of traces of human activity layered over time. In the city-palimpsest the new is superimposed on the old, the dust of today falls on the dust of yesterday (Karpińska 2004: 165).

The word “space” appears repeatedly in the concepts discussed, so it seems necessary to clarify it. For this reason, I would like to recall the definition developed by Martina Löw, inspired by Anthony Giddens’ structuration theory. According to the sociologist, spaces are “relational arrangements of people (living beings) and social goods” (Löw 2016: 141). The very expression “arrangement”, (*An*)*Ordnung*, is meant to simultaneously indicate the state of order, order (*Ordnung*), and its dynamic aspect (the prefix *-an*). The definition additionally takes into account various actors, including non-human organisms, and social goods, i.e., objects with their material and symbolic aspects. Spaces, according to Löw, are constituted, on the one hand, by processes of erection, construction, and positioning in physical space (spacing), and, on the other hand, by processes of perception, imagining, or recollection that integrate goods and people into a single space (synthesis).

3. Research method

The description of the study conducted should be preceded by an overview of the method used, in my case the grounded theory methodology. The chosen methodology poses a challenge to novice researchers, but also leaves them a fair amount of flexibility. It allows one to adopt a multifaceted approach to social phenomena and provides an opportunity to make discoveries in established research areas as much as in emerging fields (Corbin, Strauss 2015: 8–11). Due to the selected subject of the study, I decided to base my research on visual material analysis. Although many grounded theory researchers use different types of data, the visual ones were rather ignored for a long time (Konecki 2012: 14). On my research path, I mainly relied on the framework proposed by Krzysztof Konecki (2008; 2010; 2012). When analyzing visual materials, the main procedures of grounded theory apply. During the analysis, one seeks to reconstruct the four dimensions of imaging: the act of creating an image, the act of presenting it, the visual product itself and its content, and the reception of that image. Through this, the researcher tries to reconstruct its internal and external contexts (Konecki 2012). The comparative analysis of images

is also an indispensable tool. Visualizations in the form of diagrams help integrate the theory, making it easier to verify the relationships between data, categories, and notes, and linking them together (Strauss 2003: 170–214).

According to the initially defined topic, my study was to be devoted to the manifestations of history in the cityscape of Bałuty. I wanted to answer the question of how the past manifests itself in the contemporary landscape: what is evidenced by the elements present in it, which of them are distinct at first glance, and which are hidden, forgotten, or absent. I have outlined the area of interest based on the division used in the City Information System – it consists of Stare Bałuty, Marysin-Doły, Stare Miasto, and Helenów. These areas, located in the south of Bałuty, are placed next to each other and share a common history, but also show some important contrasts between them; therefore, they were to provide valuable insight into the history of Łódź. I intended to capture the landscape of the city in the photographs I took. Such a choice is related to the focus on the city's visual dimension; the inclusion of self-descriptive notes in the research process allowed me to capture the experience of being in the city space more fully. In my study, I focused on what is generally accessible and observable from the street level. For this reason, I did not delve, for instance, into the space of courtyards; they are the centers of separate worlds with gates as their boundaries (Karpieńska 2000: 128–183). I participated in organized group walks, which provided a good opportunity for observation but also allowed me to explore new routes and notice various places that I might have previously overlooked. The photographs I took are from August 2021 to February 2022. They were complemented by other existing visual materials: old city plans, archival photographs, and reconstructions of a section of the Old City. It should be noted that in visual grounded theory, data of this kind – seemingly only found by the researcher – can be treated as constructed. It is the specific decisions of the researcher that produce the data – there are no data independent of our perspective on the world (Konecki 2012: 21). The visual data, which are the main empirical data in the study, were supplemented with data from the literature of various disciplines. The literature review allows one to contextualize analysis; it helps to approach the data critically and generate theory. Some valuable information was also found in the press and online sources. As far as possible, I tried to familiarize myself with the described data in the second stage of the study, after analyzing the photographs taken. The latter were to have priority, and it was from them that I first wanted to saturate the theoretical categories.

One of the more serious problems arising from my study turned out to be the issue of subjectivity in the perception of urban space. The studied area of the city is familiar to me – it is impossible to fully distance myself from it. As Kathy Charmaz (2006: 15) points out: “We are not scientific observers who can dismiss scrutiny of our values by claiming scientific neutrality and authority. Neither observer nor observed come to a scene untouched by the world”. To enrich my perspective, I familiarized myself with materials related to the area under study; including different perspectives

in a more complete and nuanced way would require using additional methods in the study, such as walking interview. I also kept a research journal to keep track of research activities with the goal of self-reflection and increasing awareness of my own biases and assumptions that could potentially influence interpretations (Corbin, Strauss 2015: 119).

4. Results of the study

4.1. Constructing memory in urban space

The central category that emerged from the analysis is the construction of memory in urban space. The process under examination takes place between the individual and the memoryscape they experience in the city space. This approach to the discussed problem makes it possible to avoid opting for any of the radical proposals of memory as a purely personal or exclusively socially conditioned phenomenon (cf. Winter, Sivan 2000: 10). The memoryscape – like the non-memory landscape that functions in parallel – is shaped by social actors. For we are, notes Maurice Halbwachs (1969: 173), compelled to search through time and space, which our group has defined, for the moment and place where the given fact happened. The memoryscape understood in this way influences the individual's memory related to the direct or indirect experience of the city space. At the same time, individuals have their agency and can co-create the memoryscape through their actions. The relationship between the individual and the memoryscape is therefore reciprocal. Individual memory is categorized here based on Herbert Blumer's (1986) concept of the definition of a situation.

Memoryscapes, even those firmly rooted in the cityscape or the consciousness of citizens, never guarantee the closure of their related narratives; they are subject to constant interpretation and reinterpretation (Kappler 2017: 133). Hence, my decision to adopt the name “constructing memory”, which conveys the active and continuous nature of the described process, and can simultaneously draw our attention to purely material constructions, as well as those that are immaterial (contained in socio-cultural values, patterns, and practices). Moreover, grounded theory itself encourages us to analyze the data in terms of the processes that resonate through them. Other terms of similar nature are, for example, remembrance (Winter, Sivan 2000) or past presencing (Macdonald 2013).

The construction of memory proceeds under the influence of various social actors operating at different levels of social life, which can be referred to the conditional matrix. At the international level, first of all, it seems important to locate the European context and its typical memory phenomenon described in the introduction. Strongly connected with memory is historical policy, which is an institutionalized form of action by state authorities guided by a specific political

interest. Behind their actions is the desire to influence the consciousness and memory of the social community in order to shape its political identity, professed values, and individual attitudes (Kącka 2015: 66). We can look at these issues in the broader context of the transformation of Western societies described by Zygmunt Bauman as a return to tribalism, associated with the revival of strong ethnic, cultural, or religious identifications. “Once stripped of power to shape the future, politics tends to be transferred to the space of collective memory – a space immensely more amenable to manipulation and management, and for that reason promising a chance of blissful omnipotence long (and perhaps irretrievably) lost in the present and in the times yet to come” (Bauman 2017: 61). For the interests of the state, it is the national identity that will be more important than the local identity. The former, for example, dominates mainstream media or school curricula, in which little or no space is provided for issues of local history. As a result, the responsibility for the transmission of local history is distributed among multiple actors: local authorities, memory-related institutions (archives, museums, etc.), universities, local media, NGOs, artists, and the local community. Such diversification allows, on the one hand, a greater plurality of constructed memory, but on the other – it does not guarantee the same rootedness in the consciousness of citizens as Polish history. The group level, which includes vital for the transmission of memory family relations, the level of interaction and action are already closer to the individual and the formation of their consciousness of the past. A similar division into “subjects of memory” is made by Marek Ziółkowski (2001: 5–8).

4.2. Memoryscape

The memoryscape seems to be a useful category, although it is quite capacious and is used freely in texts from different fields. I lean towards the definition of a memoryscape, in which collective memory is commonly spatialized in material and symbolic dimensions (Muzaini, Yeoh 2005: 345). It can also be argued that the memoryscape encompasses temporal representations related to the city’s past located in its space and is thus part of the broader category of city image (cf. Strauss 2017). The image of Łódź is significantly influenced by its image as a “bad city”. Bałuty itself carries associations stemming from historical problems: overcrowding, poverty, and crime. It is therefore doubly disadvantaged, burdened with the reputation of a bad neighborhood located in a bad city. Much effort has been devoted to combating these negative stereotypes, and to this day they still seem to shape perceptions about Łódź and Bałuty – both among residents and outsiders.

Through the analysis, I was able to distinguish six main elements of the memoryscape that appeared in the studied area. The proposed division is flexible to some extent; there would be a possibility of different delimitation and designation of the categories. In the presented version, it includes administrative and urban layout, elements of nature, residential buildings, public institutions, inscriptions

and images, and sites of memory. Commemorating history involves not only dedicated efforts but also what we can call unintentional commemoration. This distinction can also be considered, following Andrew Szpociński (2014), in terms of intentional and unintentional memory carriers. In particular, the first four landscape elements highlighted here can be strongly linked to memory, although they are not usually the result of intentional commemoration practices. Given their ubiquity and embeddedness in everyday life, researchers can easily overlook them. It is impossible to present here all the manifestations of the construction of a landscape of memory, even from such a small part of the city. Below I present selected examples that seem important to me and provide good illustrative material.

One of the elements of the memoryscape is nature. A cursory look at the nature of Łódź, for example, may lead to the conclusion that the city has no rivers, even though there are, according to estimates, nearly 20 of them. The rivers that contributed to the development of the industrial city were polluted and then hidden underground. Their fate illustrates well the impact of human activity on nature. The well in Old Town Park (see Figure 1) allows passersby to stop, peek and listen to the course of the Łódka River. This allows for a direct, polysensory experience (being able to see the river, hear the sound of flowing water, and be aware of its distance). Elements of nature may seem like certain and inviolable evidence in terms of the city's history, but just as rivers can be brought underground, trees that are already rooted can be brought into an emerging park. This is what happened in the case of the Old Town Park, created in an area destroyed by the Germans during the war. Trees were transported to the area in the mid-1950s, which was explained by soil poverty and contamination (Leśniak 2010: 324). I would interpret this action symbolically as the erasure of past traces, creating the illusion that the trees had been growing there for a long time, that people had not lived there not so long before.



Figure 1. A well in Old Town Park showing the underground course of the Łódka River

Source: own work.

Some impression of the city's past is also provided by elements of older residential buildings. An example from Stare Bałuty (see Figure 2) shows well how successive layers of development overlap: from deteriorating remnants of wooden architecture to new residential buildings. The heterogeneous development of Bałuty was pointed out in the 1960s by Waclaw Piotrowski, who wrote about neighboring tenement houses intended for workers, old buildings located on narrow streets, and postwar residential blocks (Piotrowski 1966: 49–50). The wooden buildings or the layout of some courtyards are reminiscent of rural housing rather than urban and clash with the usual form of the urban landscape. They are among the few testimonies of the early stages of Bałuty's development.



Figure 2. Diverse architecture on Młynarska Street

Source: own work.

Another element of the memoryscape is public institutions. Usually viewed from a contemporary perspective, they bear witness to the historical development of the city. This category includes institutions of a religious nature. Historically, Łódź was a city of various religions, and signs of this past can be found in the space of Bałuty. A prominent feature in the landscape is the Church of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (*Kościół Wniebowzięcia Najświętszej Marii Panny*), whose towers are a distinctive landmark. Another building of this type is the Old Catholic Mariavite Church of St. Francis of Assisi (*Starokatolicki Kościół Mariawitów pw. św. Franciszka z Asyżu*), a testimony to the existence of a somewhat forgotten religious group in Łódź. After the outbreak of the Second World War, important sites of the Jewish community were erased from the landscape, including the Alte Szil Synagogue located on today's Wolborska Street or the Bałucka Synagogue located on Zgierska Street.

In the urban landscape, we are confronted with a multitude of inscriptions and images related to the past. One of these is the names of streets and other places in the city space. On the topic of urban naming in Łódź, it is worth referring to the work of linguists (Bieńkowska, Umińska-Tytoń 2013). The names of the streets reveal a lot about the historical development of the city and changes in historical policy. People who belong to older generations or simply lived in Bałuty for a long time sometimes still use names from before the changes in 1990. Examples include streets dedicated to communist activists: Róża Luksemburg, Włada Bytomska or Karol Liebknecht (today: Żłotnicza, Organizacji Wolność i Niezawisłość, por. Bronisława Skury-Skoczyńskiego “Robotnika”). This is how individual memory resists changes coming from the authorities. The process of “decommunization” of municipal names spared streets with more general names from the 1950s: Racjonalizatorów, Współzawodnicza, Kolektywina.

An interesting type of commemorative object is street art works. One project with such a focus is “zWnętrz” by Marta Łacka. The artist met with residents of Żytnia Street, listened to their stories, and then photographed representations of their most significant memories. She transferred the images thus obtained onto the walls of buildings on that street, creating a collective visual diary (Bieżyński 2021). In one of her works (see Figure 3), she captured the “Ż10” tattoo located on the wrist of a man who lives in a building on 10 Żytnia Street. This example shows very clearly how the site and the body can be inextricably linked.



Figure 3. Work on Żytnia Street showing the tattoo of one of the residents

Source: own work.

The last of the distinguished elements of the memory landscape are memorial sites. I propose to understand them as places with symbolic and topographical dimensions, linked to collective history, and usually organized with its commemoration in mind. The full experience of a memorial site requires being in its space and moving through it. Monuments can be considered the most important forms of commemoration: they act as modern totems, providing a visual sign of certain values (Kącka 2015: 71–72). Based on the analysis, I can distinguish the categories of traditional and modern memorials. Regarding the traditional ways of commemoration, I would include the historically older ones (but still used today): conventional monuments, commemorative plaques, and plaques with local names. The new form of memorial partly breaks with tradition; today, history is being commemorated using new forms or transforming conventional ones. Some of the forms of commemoration – exhibitions, information boards – are only temporary. If we pay attention to the content of the emerging works, we will notice that nowadays there is an increasing return to the history of the neglected and forgotten, the fate of people associated with history in different ways, belonging to persecuted or marginalized groups (e.g. Abram Cytryn and other children living in the ghetto during the war, the Roma and Sinti community, Halina Kłęb-Szwarc, Michalina Tatarówna-Majkowska).

Traditional objects associated with religion or history and the rituals taking place in their space induce a sense of solemnity, creating in the individual a sense of distance and the need to preserve it. Such objects in Bałuty are the Monument to the Glory of the Soldiers of the Łódź Army (*Pomnik Chwały Armii Łódź*) and the Children's Martyrdom Monument (*Pomnik Martyrologii Dzieci*). These sites are the center of attention during anniversary celebrations, sometimes flowers or candles are placed under them. Daily, however, these objects are taken out of the usual order; despite easy access to them, their surroundings remain empty. The space of everyday life (where traffic takes place or where adults and children spend their leisure time) is located near the monuments, yet still clearly separated from them. The new forms of monuments do not impose such distance, are created using non-classical means of expression, and even encourage an active experience. A good example is the Survivors' Park: a commemoration of the survivors of the Łódź ghetto and those who rescued Jewish citizens of Łódź during the war. The park contains various forms of commemoration but is also a place for daily walks for local residents.

In my study, the memoryscape became a more important category than the non-memoryscape. This is primarily due to the character of the collected material, that is, the photographs taken. It allowed me to discover the elements that are visible and recognized in the landscape while finding the elements that are hidden, forgotten, or absent – as stated in the original research question – was a more difficult challenge. To speak on the landscape of non-memory, it is necessary to refer to other sources (Rykała 2018: 124). The processes of remembering and forgetting take place under the influence of the needs of the present, including the search for meaning,

bonds, solidarity, identity, and a sense of belonging (Wolff-Powęska 2007: 8). Forgetting itself is realized through actions located between the poles of passivity and active action (Kwiatkowski 2009). I propose that the non-memoryscape is a category that binds non-memory sites or non-places of memory (Sendyka 2013; Rykała 2018). Its existence is associated with actions such as ignoring, hiding, or erasing elements of the memory landscape. In the study area, the construction of the landscape of memory and the landscape of non-memory seem to run in parallel. This would testify to the coexistence of parallel cycles of memory and non-memory in the collective consciousness described by Maria Hirszowicz and Elżbieta Neyman (2001: 43). Such a conclusion would also connect with the category of the city-palimpsest described earlier, which constitutes a space of losing and finding, of remembering and forgetting, of destroying and building, of meeting and parting, of birth and death (Karpńska 2004: 165).

Places in Bałuty that oscillate between memory and oblivion include the square at 14 Zachodnia Street (called Fireman's Square in the Łódź Ghetto – it was there that Chaim Mordechai Rumkowski, the superior of the Jewish Elders, made his speech heralding the Great Shpera), the old Jewish cemetery at Zachodnia Street (destroyed by the Germans during the war, and finally liquidated after the war, when the city authorities demarcated its area for the widening of Zachodnia Street and the construction of apartment blocks), and the Old Market Square (fulfilling the role of a city market before the war and a commemorative space after the war, it seems to have lost its own identity today). Examples of rivers flowing beneath the surface, cemeteries, or foundations buried in the ground show how literally the palimpsest structure of the city can sometimes manifest itself. On the occasion of various explorations, excavations, or restoration works, memory comes to light in a material and symbolic way at the same time. Rediscovered memories of the past then return, escaping the realm of non-memory.

The category of fighting for attention is related to the variety of symbolic representations in the city space. The literature often emphasizes the intensity of the experience of the space of larger cities. Overexposure forces the individual to cut themselves off to some extent from their surroundings and to become indifferent to the constantly incoming sensations. The modern city is overflowing with signs belonging to various discourses. The commemoration discourse is only one of them; others include, for example, the commercial or football fan discourse. The former is present on storefronts, advertisements, and billboards; advertising materials are a ubiquitous component of the landscape of Polish cities and are still insufficiently regulated. Fan activity in urban space manifests itself in various forms, but the most visible one is graffiti. The characteristic form of expression of club identity is seen and processed by artists, in works such as Barbara Olejarczyk's paintings from the series "*Wszędzie widzę Widzew*" (I See Widzew Everywhere) or a series of wall inscriptions created by an author nicknamed Janusz III Waza mocking the conflict between the local football clubs.

4.3. Individual experience

The issue of the individual's perspective relating to the memory landscape recurs constantly with the above descriptions of the memory landscape. The integration of categories that testify to an individual's experience was facilitated by Blumer's concept of situation definition. According to the sociologist's position of symbolic interactionism, "activity of human beings consists of meeting a flow of situations in which they have to act and that their action is built on the basis of what they note, how they assess and interpret what they note, and what kind of projected lines of action they map out" (Blumer 1986: 16).

Thus, I propose that the experience of an individual grappling with the objects contained in the landscape of memory should be considered a process that consists of stages: perception of the city space, interpretation and evaluation of meanings, and action in relation to the space.

The memoryscape is a many-sided phenomenon, susceptible to different interpretations, competing for attention with other symbols, and easily blending into everyday experience. These properties can negatively affect the viewer's attentiveness and reflectiveness. Urban spaces often contain traces of the past, but these can be difficult to pick up, especially in the everyday experience. Noticing them requires increased vigilance, and decoding them requires reference to the knowledge at hand. Commemorative objects, on the other hand, are easy to see and interpret, or at least they are usually created with this intention. What happens when the city space lacks a sign linking a place to the past? Finding one's way around such a place is a difficult task. The absence of any form of commemoration at a memorial site does not provide any basis for action; there is no place where one can stand and give reflection or a plaque to which one can approach and read about what once happened at a particular place.

Interpretation refers to the knowledge one possesses and their own memories. The same places can carry completely different meanings for different individuals, especially if their biographies are involved. To interpret a given object, it is sometimes necessary to turn to external sources. The role of the Internet is manifested here, which allows people to find their way around the space and learn more about it, both locals and people who are in a given place for the first time (perhaps the Internet should therefore be considered as a place of memory, or at least a carrier of important information for the shaping of knowledge about the past).

Certain symbols associated with collective memory will usually be easy to interpret and this reading will be shared by the city residents – differences may arise only in their evaluation. Thus, for example, abandoned buildings that testify to the passage of time usually arouse negative associations, and may bring up nostalgia and regret, but the proposed actions to change this situation can differ significantly. This is the case with the Helena Wolf Hospital (also known as the Kasa Chorych Hospital), standing on Łagiewnicka Street. Its renovation, which

began in the 1980s, never came to fruition (a new, unfinished wing of the hospital is still visible on the north side). The apparent deterioration of the building is met with opposition from local residents, demands for renovation, and ideas for utilizing the building (Rutkiewicz 2019). This example proves that the fate of old architecture is not indifferent to the residents of Bałuty, at least in the case of once significant places. The site must have once been full of life, especially since it also served as a birthing hospital. During one of the organized walks through Bałuty, its participants seemed interested in the fate of the building and interpreted it in various ways: commenting on the appearance of the building, locating it in their family histories, finding in the neglect of the building a conspiracy at higher levels of power, inquiring about its future.

Based on the example of the mentioned memory sites, I tried to show that each object sets users a framework for action, and induces them to behave in one way or another. How does one come into contact with forms of commemoration? Contemporary forms of commemoration often give the viewer a chance for an active experience; they become part of the dimension of everyday life, the function of commemoration being realized as if in passing, but remaining (maybe precisely because of this) fully present. From my own experience, I can say that staying near the traditional forms of commemoration does not fit into the nature of the modern city, which encourages movement and action. Stopping in a public place can make an individual feel uneasy – it is read by both sides of the interaction as inappropriate, potentially suspicious (see Konecki 2017). Activities such as stopping in a city space, talking about it, or photographing it become more “natural” when undertaken with another person or in a group. Other individuals provide a point of reference, a chance for a wider range of activities, and legitimize them. Besides, even during group walks, situations arise that disrupt the role of the aloof stroller, for example, when one enters the semiprivate space of backyards, or when one interacts with residents.

5. Conclusions

Based on the analysis, I would like to present the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1. Administrative and urban layout, elements of nature, residential buildings, urban institutions, inscriptions and images, and memorials constitute the urban landscape of memory.

The described elements of the memory landscape have various functions and are usually inscribed in the daily experience of the city. Activities aimed at commemorating the past are primarily associated with the categories of inscriptions, images, and memorials. The 21st century has seen the proliferation of a form of contemporary commemoration that reaches out to previously overlooked events and figures and offers audiences an engaging experience.

Hypothesis 2. Memory in urban space is formed between the individual and the memoryscape.

The construction of memory is not an exclusively social or individual phenomenon. Memory is culturally and socially conditioned, influenced by institutional and noninstitutional actors operating at different levels of social life. Awareness of the past is largely shaped by the transmission of individuals from the environment, especially the family – this is how communicative memory is maintained. Cultural memory, in turn, is transmitted institutionalized in schools or museums, in media messages, and also through public space.

Hypothesis 3. The urban memoryscape clashes with the non-memoryscape – individual memories and threads of the past move between the areas of memory and oblivion.

The space of the city is one of the fields where the coexisting processes of constructing memory and oblivion are manifested. Particularly difficult topics cause the greatest tensions between forgetting and remembering, between ignoring or erasing past events and restoring them to public consciousness.

Hypothesis 4. The landscape of memory competes for the attention of individuals with other symbolic representations in the city space.

The city space is full of a variety of signs. Temporal representations are only one of many that occur in the city and make up its symbolism. The category I have called “fighting for attention” indicates the coexistence of these representations and their accumulation in the individual experience of everyday life.

Hypothesis 5. The individual perceiving the city space and interpreting the meanings found there takes actions that affect the landscape of memory.

The individual who experiences the city space interprets and evaluates the signs present in it, according to their knowledge and previous experience. On this basis, one draws a line of action and interacts with themselves and with others. One’s actions can shape the memory landscape and influence others’ actions.

Based on an analysis of the landscape of the selected part of the city and the available literature, I am ready to conclude that nothing heralds the twilight of the memory phenomenon for the time being. In the near future, further exploration and commemoration of topics hitherto overlooked should be expected, as should the continued focus of states on historical politics. It should be the task of sociologists and other researchers of social life to keep a close eye on which threads of the past are being erased or ignored, how these processes are taking place, who is responsible for them, and what their potential consequences may be. The area of the city that I explored is filled with all kinds of images of the past. Bałuty is at a stage of intense transformation; this is manifested in the city landscape itself, but it is also, I believe, realized by its residents. It is my dream that the old area of Bałuty will see a real revitalization, which would provide residents with decent living conditions, taking into account their local identity, and would also save the neglected parts of the city from degradation, respecting its historical fabric. In such an ideal vision, the future is not separated from the past but is enrooted in it.

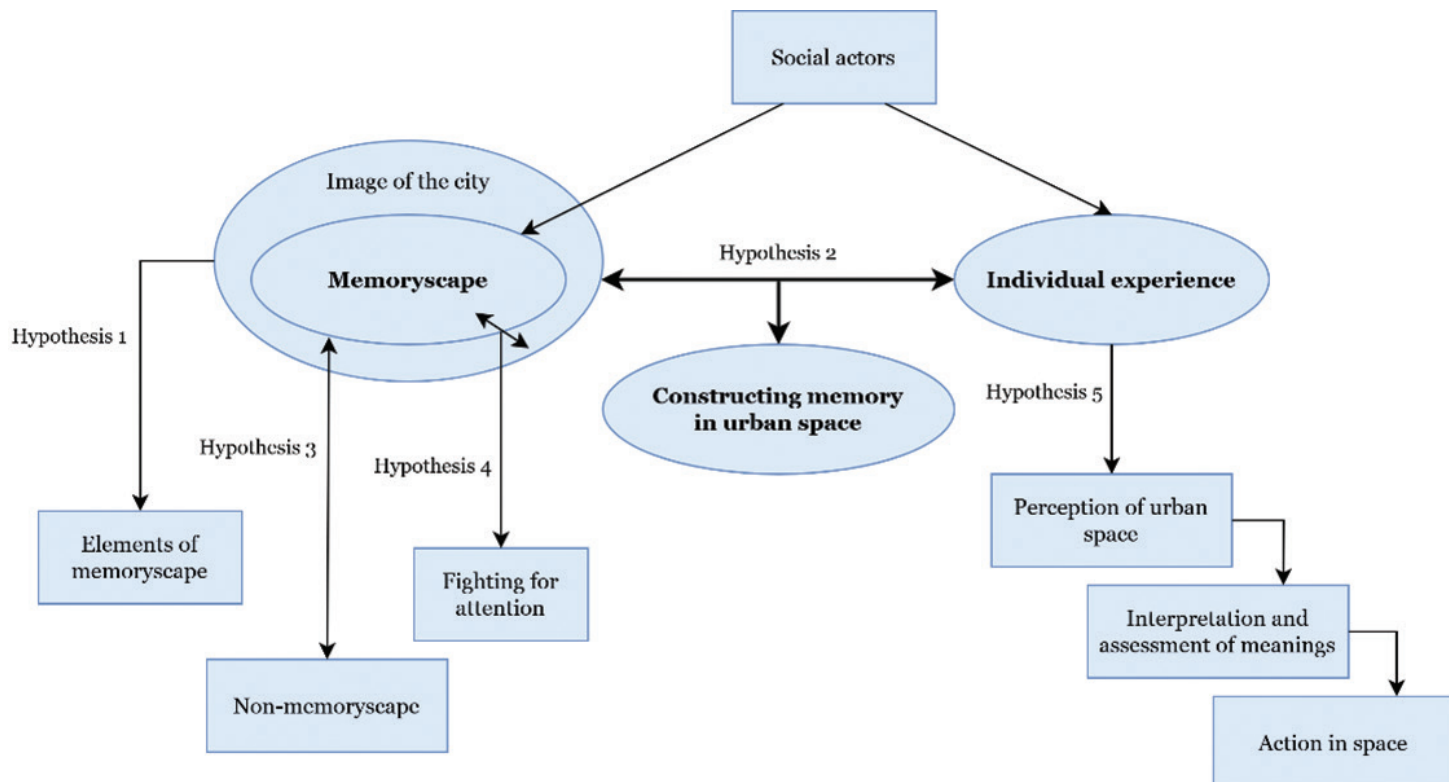


Diagram 1. Constructing memory in urban space

Source: own work.


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RITUAL IN SPORT – AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF TABLE TENNIS PLAYERS

Abstract. The article was devoted to analysing the specifics of the phenomenon of rituals and their social impact. Ritual activities can be diverse, and their characteristics are likely to be specific only to certain social groups. The peri-sport sphere is exceptionally saturated with ritual practices, and the interest in this phenomenon may be compounded by the fact that sports are a relatively under-researched area from a social perspective. In analysing aspects related to the practices in question, it was necessary to refer to psychological mechanisms, an anthropological perspective and a key one – the sociological approach of such theorists as Randall Collins, Erving Goffman, and Émile Durkheim.

In the remainder of the article, spectator and highly media-oriented sports were primarily scrutinised. These disciplines were chosen because the players practising them are characterised by a high degree of use of rituals, and they are activities that allow for more straightforward observation of many of the attributes associated with the practices in question. Prioritised in the context of this article was the analysis of a self-reported survey conducted on professional table tennis players. The fundamental data collection method was an online survey, the results augmented by participant observation. The purpose of the study was to find out the specifics of table tennis players' rituals. Devoting attention to the plane associated with table tennis was essential due to the lack of scientific information on this social group and the widespread use of rituals by the players surveyed. As a result, the issue of athletes' rituals was enriched with information on players' habits of another exciting sport – table tennis.

Keywords: ritual, the social dimension of sports, contemporary, table tennis players, quantitative survey.

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RYTUAL W SPORCIE – BADANIE EMPIRYCZNE TENISISTÓW STOŁOWYCH

Abstrakt. Artykuł został poświęcony analizie specyfiki zjawiska rytuałów i ich społecznego oddziaływania. Działania rytualne mogą być zróżnicowane, a ich cechy charakterystyczne tylko dla określonych grup społecznych. Sfera okołosportowa jest niezwykle bogata w zastosowanie rytuałów, a zainteresowanie tym fenomenem potęgować może fakt, iż sport jest relatywnie słabo przebadanym obszarem pod kątem społecznym. Przy analizie aspektów związanych z omawianymi praktykami, konieczne było odniesienie do mechanizmów psychologicznych, perspektywy antropologicznej oraz kluczowego – ujęcia socjologicznego takich teoretyków jak: Randall Collins, Erving Goffman, czy Émile Durkheim. W dalszej części artykułu pod ogląd zostały wzięte przede wszystkim sporty widowiskowe i wysoce medialne. Dyscypliny te zostały wybrane, ponieważ zawodnicy je uprawiający charakteryzują się wysokim stopniem zastosowania rytuałów oraz są to aktywności, które pozwalają na łatwiejsze zaobserwowanie wielu atrybutów związanych z omawianymi praktykami. Priorytetowa w kontekście niniejszego artykułu była analiza badania własnego, przeprowadzonego na profesjonalnych tenisistach stołowych. Kluczową metodą zbierania danych została ankieta internetowa, której wyniki wzbogaciła obserwacja uczestnicząca. Celem badania było poznanie specyfiki rytuałów tenisistów stołowych. Poświęcenie uwagi płaszczyźnie związanej z tenisem stołowym było istotne, ze względu na brak naukowych informacji na temat tej grupy społecznej oraz z uwagi na powszechne stosowanie rytuałów przez badanych zawodników. W efekcie, problematyka rytuałów sportowców, została wzbogacona o informacje dotyczące nawyków zawodników kolejnej, niezwykle interesującej dyscypliny sportowej, jaką jest tenis stołowy.

Słowa kluczowe: rytuał, społeczny wymiar sportu, współczesność, tenisiści stołowi, badanie ilościowe.

1. Introduction

This article is devoted to a sociological analysis of the importance of rituals in the lives of athletes. Sports is a sphere of social life in which repetitive practices of a ritualistic nature are widespread. They have a particular impact on the functioning of athletes as individuals and in the context of group functioning – distinguishing them from each other while creating collective demands (Lenartowicz, Dobrzycki 2019: 74–83). The analysis was conducted on male and female table tennis players. The main research problem concerned the importance of rituals for table tennis players, accompanied by more specific research questions: What is the social extent of table tennis players' rituals? How often do players perform rituals? What rituals do players practice? How do players define and perceive the impact of the rituals they practice?

An analysis of the importance of rituals in the lives of athletes requires placing the phenomenon under study in a broader theoretical context, as well as an approximation of what the role of rituals is in the context of the individual and the social view. The text references the theoretical works of such theorists as Randall Collins, Erving Goffman, and Émile Durkheim. Their assumptions and perceptions

of rituals will impact the reflection strictly related to the possible properties of the ritual practices of sports players. The first part of the text provides an approximation of the scientific understanding and meaning of rituals. In the following part of the text, attention will be paid to contemporary rituals and specific practices observable in the peri-sport sphere. The next section of the article introduces my research methodology, while the last and most crucial part of the article is devoted to the analysis conducted on table tennis players.

2. Rituals in social life

Rituals are usually associated with a momentous ritual whose purpose is to bring about change, primarily in the status and role of the individual, which is what research anthropologists are most interested in. Victor Turner was an anthropologist who devoted much time to research on rituals and left a crucial mark in their analysis (Turner 2010: 115). The Briton made a significant impact trying to understand the essence of the practices in question, the description of their structure and properties. He introduced the rite of passage concept, derived from Arnold van Gennep's approach (van Gennep 2006). Thanks to the broad interest of anthropologists in the phenomenon of ritual, they are generally identified with traditional societies. In contrast, today, in developed societies, the concept of ritual is much more complex and presented from different perspectives. Many rituals are firmly rooted in culture, inscribed to such an extent in the identity of individuals that they cannot function without them. For this reason, this phenomenon is an essential element in the functioning of society. Rituals often impart a high degree of organisation and systematisation in social life. On the other hand, it should be emphasised that the varieties, purposes, uses, and generally, the characteristics of rituals can change depending on the individual's social role and his definition of the situation. Different rituals may be used by a labourer, a politician, a student and still others by an athlete, depending on the field of activity in which he finds himself.

In addition to the anthropological approach, the issue of the importance of rituals in the lives of athletes is also dealt with by social psychology. It allows us to understand in a certain way what is behind these repetitive actions and to find the mechanisms responsible for them. For example, a concept that may correspond to the rituals present in sports is the *behavioural reinforcement theory* created by Burrhus Frederic Skinner (Golnau 2018: 77–92). It primarily concerns reinforcing incentives contributing to winning or success during sports competitions. An athlete, seeing effective results, will repeat his ritual practices with much more enthusiasm. Another concept that inspires further psychological analysis of sports players' rituals is the *expectancy theory*, created by Victor Vroom. According to it, when deciding on specific actions, an individual has certain expectations of them and expects imagined results (Vroom 1995: 350–432). When initiating a ritual correlated

with a sport, the athlete has a form of desire associated with it, the manifestation of which is an expected result. In many cases, the athlete performs them to help himself somehow. On the other hand, different in its content but no less relevant to the subject of athletes' rituals, is a mechanism called *social proof*. "Psychological research shows that people are more willing to engage in actions undertaken by others" (Dolinski 2002: 35–52). Seeing that a significant part of the group uses rituals, the individual also begins to replicate them. Very often, they become unique in some way and can be considered an identity feature of the social group. The last doctrine that will be addressed with athletes' rituals in a psychological context concerns obsessive-compulsive disorder, otherwise known as obsessive *neurosis*. Sometimes ritual practices can manifest this nature. Over time, they no longer provide any form of pleasure, and their use becomes a real torment.

It should be emphasised that sociological theories that address the subject of ritual are much more in line with modern times and primarily the sports sphere. Erving Goffman (2012) and Randall Collins (2011) are among the sociological classics who have spent considerable time analysing the phenomenon of ritual in their reflections, and their interpretations can be applied to sports players (even if they mainly emphasised the interactional dimensions of rituals). First of all, Goffman and Collins pay attention to the concept of the situation when interpreting the phenomenon of ritual. In the case of athletes, this also becomes relevant since participation in the situation of training or sports competition conditions the ritual activities of the athlete. In his concepts, Goffman also referred extensively to the notion of stage and backstage, where for an athlete, such a place could be the field or hall, where the athlete undertakes competition and practices rituals. On the other hand, Collins mainly referred to the interactional form of repetitive practices, in which the mechanisms of emotional charge, attachment to symbols, and the related issue of motivation can also be referred to as athletes' experiences (Collins 2011: 3–12). Another critical assumption of classic sociologists is to pay attention to the element of repetition of rituals, which, according to Émile Durkheim, makes them durable and robust (Durkheim 2010). The cited thought can also be applied and compared to the world of sports. The longer one practices rituals and has a conviction of their effectiveness, the more valuable they will be to the athlete and the consequence of which can be a great attachment to them. The cited theorist also alluded to maintaining group cohesion when analysing rituals. In sports, there are many practices that, when repeated systematically, can serve to maintain group unity, especially in the context of the so-called *team spirit*.

The space of the article needs to be more modest to recapitulate in detail the concepts of the theorists cited here, and it is also challenging to evoke a single, universal concept of ritual ideally suited to interpreting athletes' behaviour. Given the interdisciplinary significance of ritual (from psychological meanings to social conditions), one may also be tempted to propose one's understanding of ritual in the context of athletes' practices. Ritual, concerning athletes, is a repetitive activity

that deals with phenomena that have a specific meaning for the individual. It has a specific purpose, value and content and is accompanied by a subjective motive and emotion. It is associated with a specific place and situation in space. An important aspect is a specific scheme based on which a ritual is performed. Its basis can be secular or sacred, and the nature of the action is individual or collective. Only the individuals participating in it experience it fully. Rituals may be characterised by a particular frequency of their performance within a particular social group and replicated by a significant part. However, the isolated characteristics regarding such practices are diverse and dependent on the individual's disposition. The next section of the article will aim to show (among other things, based on previous research) what such rituals look like in sports. It will attempt to interpret, to show the variation in the properties of rituals practised by players and teams in different sports.

3. Rituals in sports

The corporeal correlates of the repetitive practices of athletes are a noteworthy issue due to their frequent occurrence in modern society (Hargreaves 1995: 139–159). The role of the body is irreplaceable because, without bodily involvement, most sports would not exist. In addition to the necessity of engaging the athlete's physical sphere, related to the desire to perform the role to the best of one's ability, there are correlations with such planes as symbolism, emotions, defining situations, or at least – with the motivational field. A player's body language can serve as a tool to convey something more than an imposed game strategy. Posture, gesticulation or motor activity can be used for varied practices and forms that carry an established message. A plethora of bodily practices and habits can be observed among footballers. Most of them are related to celebrating a goal (Turner 2012: 1–18). Krzysztof Piątek's celebration seems to be the most characteristic, especially for Polish fans. After a goal is scored, the Polish footballer touches his knees on the ground, crossing his arms, performs imitations of gunshots. Observing football matches, one can conclude that the more prestigious the games are, the more often the players perform their unique celebratory rituals. On the other hand, in other bodily rituals, one can notice the presence of a religious aspect. Before entering the field, Spaniards habitually touch the turf with their hand, kiss their palm, and make the sign of the cross, not infrequently looking up to the sky. Others are tasked with conveying a specific message – like the fact that their partner is pregnant. Football players convey such a message by holding their bellies and imitating thumb-sucking immediately after scoring a goal. However, tennis player Rafael Nadal is a specific symbol of bodily rituals. The Spaniard must touch his hair and nose before each serve. Without this action – he will not perform the service.

Repetitive practices, which need a form associated with spoken language to exist, can be called – verbal rituals. A bonding structure is formed around a team

with similar goals and values. For this reason, a social group can share the same emotions and mutually “infect” each other with them: “As a result, the emotional mood becomes stronger and more dominant; competing feelings are displaced by the main group feeling” (Collins 2011: 129). The team becomes a unity in such moments and a collective that depends on each other and its emotions, which corresponds to the concept of group solidarity, which Émile Durkheim referred to as religious rituals and the aspect of integration (Jacher 1973: 43–62). In sports, such emotions often correlate with the interaction present during games, visible in various forms – interaction. Verbal rituals can cause an individual to be filled with much greater energy, motivation, confidence and willingness to fight. People who share a common vision and desire can motivate each other to succeed. Therefore, verbal forms of repetitive practices usually have positive and mobilising overtones. The tone, the timing of their performance, or, for example, the people toward whom the activity is performed – can be significant. As with any ritual, individuals may have their individual and specific habits. However, in the case of their verbal manifestation, they are often collective, shared by the group.

Numerous chants, slang or specific shouts are the most common form of such rituals. In the Polish sports world, the phrase “na cześć osób z drużyny przeciwnej, cześć!” which means: “in honour of those on the opposing team, cheers!” and has become accepted in many disciplines, emphasising the respect directed at competitors. However, in the context of chants, one of the most recognisable rituals seems to be the celebration of the Polish national football team, who, after a victory, sing such Polish hits as: “Bałkanica”, “Przez twe oczy zielone” or “Ona tańczy dla mnie”. This practice occurs in sports (especially at its professional level) relatively often, symbolising the joy of the players. Another recurring verbal practice is used by famous Brazilian football player Neymar, which involves a brief conversation with his father before the start of a match. Meanwhile, spoken language is also used when celebrating a goal or the joy of a point won, such as Iga Świątek’s characteristic cry of “Jazda!” after almost every point scored. Verbal rituals, like bodily ones, are prevalent in the peri-sports sphere.

In the peri-sport area, many objects or objects simultaneously symbolise or carry significant meaning, becoming part of the athlete’s ritual. Despite their defined role and purpose, they can be treated ambiguously, creating their new use for the individual. One can think of such artefacts as trophies, clothing, jewellery or, for example, sports equipment. Athletes can create a certain aura around them, which they believe is conducive to good luck or hinders their path to success. This perception of “talismans” can be motivated by diverse factors. Religious, magical or separate from these spheres, secular content can be associated with the objects. Durkheim identified sacred things with emotions associated with a sense of attachment (Jacher 1973: 43–62).

It is also not uncommon for rituals concerning a particular artefact to be related to superstitions (Maranise 2013: 83–91) that the player believes in. A fascinating

ritual is the one used by all athletes participating in one of the Grand Slam tennis tournaments – Wimbledon:

Athletes participating in this spectacle are required to choose tennis clothing only in white, and this rule applies to both male and female tennis players. This element symbolically can indicate the equality of all athletes, who prove their worth and superiority only on the tennis court, not racing, by competitions for the highest number of sponsor names written on their shirts (Kubaniec 2020: 65–76).

This is a collective ritual of players that has become a tradition. Another practice is for players to remove their jerseys after scoring a goal. Usually, this action is intended to convey a message from a particular player symbolically.

An example is the practice of Brazilian footballer Kaká, who, to show his deep faith to all viewers, wore a white one with the inscription “I belong to Jesus” under his club jersey. Meanwhile, when it comes to the specific habits of athletes, tennis player Rafael Nadal should be mentioned again. Before making a serve, the Spaniard must touch his shorts and socks. Rituals associated with artefacts are among the most diverse. This is due to the vast number of objects a ritual aura can surround.

The last ritual plane to be addressed is the mental one. It connects with imagined practices that usually exist mainly in the athlete’s imagination. They are often superstitions or the religious sphere close to the athlete. It is worth noting that a significant part of mental rituals are associated with superstitions or superstitions (Bleak, Frederick 1998: 1–15) that the athlete believes in. Habits, most of whose “scenario” takes place in the athlete’s imagination, manifest much freedom and flexibility in their possible variations. Such a superstition can be an athlete’s attachment to a certain number. Former Real Madrid football player Iván Zamorano showed loyalty to his lucky symbol powerfully. This was the number “9”, which for a long time appeared on his jersey during football matches. Another type of mental ritual, unrelated to a lucky or unlucky number, can be the belief in horoscopes and related beliefs about an individual’s future or character. They set a particular path that a superstitious athlete is inclined to follow. The tendency to believe in the validity of horoscopes and similar “prophecies” is distinguished by a former football player and current coach of Atlético Madrid club – Diego Simeone. With the issue of the presence of “magical” behaviours, it is important to note that in the sphere of sports, they are also popular among fans, as Przemysław Nosal touched on the example of bookmaker betting (Nosal 2023: 18–21). Mental rituals, on the other hand, lacking the approximate specificity focused on superstition, are often associated with prayer (Watson, Czech 2005: 1–16), visualisation of games or self-motivation.

Although the presented rituals were discussed separately as separate forms of activities, it should be noted that each of the cited areas can intertwine. Rituals are not always closely related to only one sphere, and this is due to their properties, which can be highly complex and multifaceted. As a specific underlying pattern, one can

again invoke the figure of Rafael Nadal, whose habits would indeed find reference in each of the categories mentioned. For this reason, it is essential to remember that ritual is a highly multidimensional phenomenon, and sometimes its structure is not as simple as it may seem. Their multifaceted nature and popularity should prompt sociologists or psychologists to look more precisely at specifics. In the rest of this article, we will look at what properties the rituals of table tennis players have.

4. Methodology for studying the rituals of table tennis players

Table tennis is a sport relatively rarely studied regarding social functioning (Ciok, Lenartowicz 2020). Researchers, especially sociologists, do not address the ritual practices of the players of this sport and their social impact in their analyses. The following study fills this gap to some extent.

The discipline of table tennis and its players were chosen because of my own experience: I have been training the sport professionally for 18 years. Such long-standing expertise in functioning in the studied environment allowed me to move freely among the players and athletes and establish contact with them. The risk is that excessive “immersion” in the studied environment, an “insider” position, can lead to value judgments, certain simplifications and a lack of criticism. Despite such risks, I treated the table tennis environment as professionally as possible, maintaining objectivity and scientific integrity in my explanations.

The primary measurement tool was the CAWI technique, supported by the one I conducted – participant observation. CAWI is a data collection method that allows you to get responses from multiple respondents. Another impetus behind the choice of analysis tool was my seniority in the material collection environment. Being part of the table tennis community made getting the desired response returns much more accessible. Another factor that determined the choice of data collection technique was its possible reach. I could send questions to players from different parts of Poland through the online survey. On the other hand, it should also be mentioned what limitations the CAWI method may carry. The main drawback is the lack of adequate control over the respondent. Sending the survey over the Internet, we cannot control what happens later. The individual filling it out may not be the person whose answers we care about. However, in the case of a survey on athletes’ rituals, this is unlikely since the specifics of the questions correspond to a group like table tennis players. In analysing the goods and weaknesses of the chosen quantitative method, it is essential to emphasise that, despite the limitations, the material collected offered the possibility of concluding the rituals of table tennis.

An additional tool used in the study was overt participatory and non-participatory observation (Frankfort-Nachmias, Nachmias 2001: 220–239). With the ability to actively participate in the table tennis environment, systematically monitor players’ rituals and thus apply triangulation becomes available (Webb 2006: 449–458). The

observation focused on the practices of either training or competition at different moments of activity. It is a qualitative snapshot that can enrich the study with essential conclusions.

Undoubtedly, a significant factor in the study is sampling (Babbie 2013: 204–206). Non-random selection methods – non-probabilistic – were used in the quantitative analysis. This is a technique in which the selection of respondents is usually subjective due to the knowledge of the specific structure of the study population. In the study on table tennis players, this type of respondent selection was desirable due to the focus on professional players only. Accordingly, two procedures were implemented. The first was the purposive selection method. It involves intentionally selecting respondents who qualify for specific characteristics correlated with the study. The second technique was the snowball selection method. A player who completed the survey was asked to pass it on to more tennis players.

Based on the research questions posed, the following hypotheses were formed and verified based on the self-examination:

1. Rituals are a common phenomenon practised by table tennis players.
2. The most common practices of players are body rituals.
3. The most common purpose of practising rituals by players is to increase their self-confidence.
4. The more superstitious the player, the more rituals he has.

In addition, the following section will analyse and interpret the qualitative method used, which played an enriching role in the results of the primary form of exploration of the table tennis community – an online survey.

A total of **108** professional male and female tennis players participated in the survey. The respondents belonged to different sports clubs, but all represented national colours belonging to Poland and had several years of playing experience. The selected players played in the country's top leagues and appeared in the most prestigious tournaments at the national or international level. Their age varied, but most respondents were 19–21 (youth players) or 22–39 (seniors). At the same time, it is worth noting that the categories were divided according to the official regulations on the age range in Polish table tennis. After receiving the returns satisfactorily, there was a stage of precise data transfer to the *SPSS* statistical program.

5. Analysis of own research

This section will discuss the main results of the research conducted on table tennis players. First, it is advisable to present the quantitative method's results. The base issue was to determine whether the players have any rituals related to the peri-sport sphere. The definition of the term ritual, adopted in the article, was presented to the respondents in a descriptive way in the questionnaire's introduction. I divided the issue into repetitive activities correlated

with training and table tennis competitions. Thanks to this juxtaposition, I can compare the two situations and conclude that a more significant proportion of respondents have rituals correlated with professional games (96.5%) than with training (90.4%). However, this is a slight difference, and it should be emphasised that in both cases, almost all players have their ritual habits. The data obtained from the survey leads to the conclusion that rituals are a widespread activity and have a specific role in the sports life of table tennis players. The following more detailed results will be presented in the form of charts.

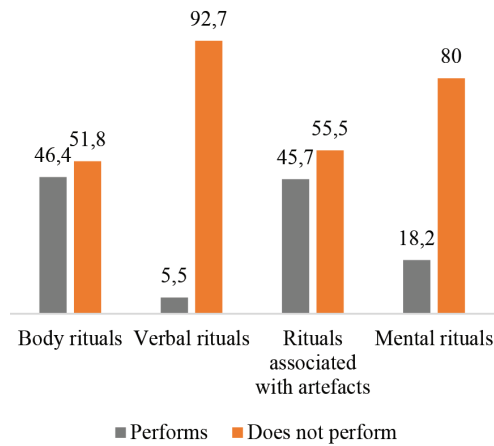


Chart 1. The type of rituals performed related to table tennis training (%)

Source: own research

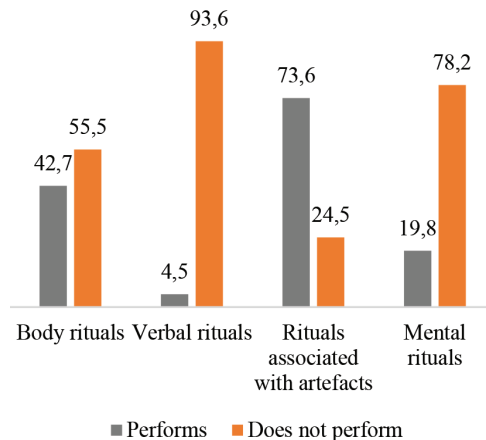


Chart 2. Type of rituals performed related to table tennis competitions (%)

Source: own research

The charts presented above show data related to the characteristics of players' rituals. Respondents who had previously declared practising rituals during training and/or competition were asked to describe their repetitive habits. A thorough analysis of each stated practice was necessary to separate the categories. Notably, the forms of rituals created did not blend, and their categorisation was not in doubt. Body rituals show the highest percentage of use among players when associated with training (46.4%), while those correlated with artefacts when associated with table tennis competitions (73.6%). It should be noted that the listed habits most often corresponded to both categories. Verbal rituals (less than 6%) and mental rituals (less than 20%) were used much less frequently by respondents, regardless of the type of activity. Several recurring practices, as well as more personalised and original ones, could be found in respondents' answers. Providing examples of tennis players' rituals relevant to the study is advisable.

Table 1. The most common rituals of table tennis players

Ritual	Number of indications	Percentage of indications
Listening to music	76	70.3
Wearing a lucky shirt	66	61.1
Bounce the ball a specific number of times	65	60.1
Folding a towel into a cube	44	40.7
Touching the soles of shoes with the palm of the hand	38	35.1
Wearing special jewellery	31	28.7
Mental self-motivation	30	27.7

Source: own research.

Above, in the form of a table, the frequently repeated practices in the respondents' declared answers were singled out. The listed activities were arranged in descending order, starting with the most frequently used ritual. It can be noted that (as the previous charts indicated) – practices related to artefacts predominate. It should be noted that rituals involving listening to music (70.3%), wearing a lucky shirt (61.1%) and bouncing a ball (60.1%) were mentioned by far the most frequently. This shows that repetitive practices are characteristic of the general collective in a sport like table tennis.

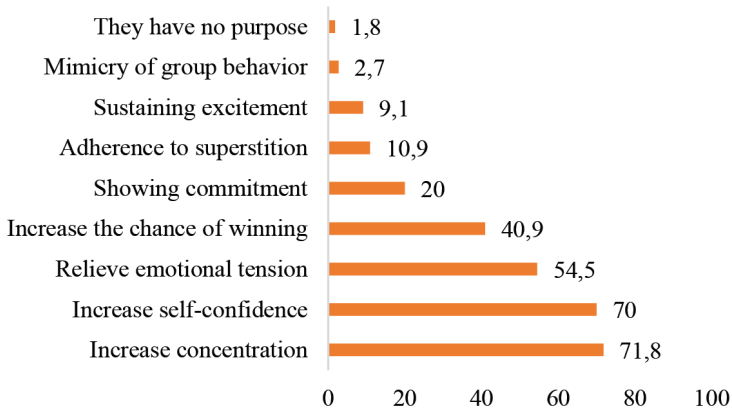


Chart 3. Purpose of the players practising table tennis rituals (%)

Source: own research

An essential question for the study was the issue of the purpose of tennis players practising rituals. It turns out that only 1.8% of players believe that their habitual actions have no meaning. This shows that by their practices, almost all respondents aim at something and have a specific, rational purpose. Most often, the intention of their rituals is correlated with increasing concentration (71.8%) and self-confidence (70%). Relatively often, tennis players also chose a role related to relieving emotional tension (54.5%) and increasing the chance of winning (40.9%). It is advisable to mention that those with religious rituals were much more likely to indicate the goal of observing superstitions (10.9%). Few respondents felt that the purpose of their rituals was to imitate the group's behaviour (2.7%).

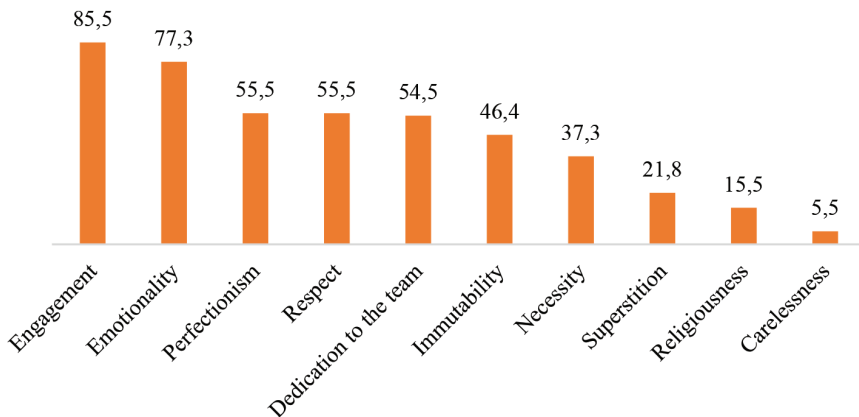


Chart 4. Terms that match the rituals of the players associated with table tennis (%)

Source: own research

Players should have assigned corresponding terms to them to understand the rituals' characteristics better. The most significant number of respondents are related to commitment (85.5%) and emotionality (77.3%). Most tennis players' qualities require a significant personal contribution and a particular effort on the part of the individual. This indicates that they are primarily attached to them and do not treat their rituals unequally. Such qualities as respect (55.5%) and devotion to the team (54.5%) undoubtedly have positive overtones, with which more than half of the respondents identify. In contrast, a trait with a more negative tinge – carelessness – was indicated as a property of rituals in only 5.5% of players.

Table 2. Degree of superstitiousness of table tennis players (%)

	I agree	I rather agree	I rather disagree	I disagree	Hard to say
Keeping your fingers crossed brings good luck	22,2	38,9	10,2	22,2	6,5
Grabbing a button when meeting a chimney sweep brings good luck	9,3	25,9	24,1	37,0	3,7
A found four-leaf clover brings good luck	23,1	34,3	12,0	25,9	4,6
Breaking a mirror brings 7 years of misery	7,4	26,9	16,7	42,6	6,5
Seeing a black cat crossing the road brings lousy luck	9,3	19,4	25,9	39,8	5,6
Shaking hands across the threshold brings lousy luck	8,3	23,1	20,4	44,4	3,7
The number 13 brings bad luck	7,4	22,2	15,7	50,9	3,7
It is necessary to knock on wood so as not to zap the excellent fortune	10,2	31,5	14,8	38,0	5,6
Getting out of bed with the left foot causes failures alone	6,5	27,8	14,8	44,4	6,5
Spilt salt brings bad luck	5,6	23,1	15,7	48,1	7,4

Source: own research.

Surveys conducted by CBOS show that in an increasingly rationalised world, the belief of Polish people in superstitions is still alive, and irrational customs continue to be quite popular in practice (CBOS 2018). Similar conclusions can be drawn from the table presented above, showing the degree to which athletes believe in the most common Polish superstitions unrelated to the sport they practice. During the study, examining the respondents' susceptibility to superstitions unrelated to sports was deemed advisable to see if this impacts the number of rituals used and their characteristics. As can be seen, the percentages were distributed very

differently, depending on the superstition in question. Most people believe in good luck, which they think is brought by keeping one's fingers crossed and a four-leaf conch found. In contrast, the above data allowed us to draw the statistical conclusion that superstitious athletes have **19.4% more** rituals than non-superstitious athletes, meaning those characterised by magical or irrational thinking are more prone to ritualistic behaviour. The obtained result indicates that superstition, embodied in everyday life, may influence the amount of table tennis-related rituals used. Despite the presence of the cited relationship, it should be emphasised that non-superstitious players dominate the table tennis community.

In addition to the quantitative study discussed above, it is also worth considering the conclusions of the additionally conducted – qualitative analysis. Thanks to my personal experience, I systematically observed tennis players' habits – regularly and over a long period. Participating in training and competitions daily, I had freedom and easy access to the subject of my study. The observation confirmed all the results collated so far, collected with the quantitative tool.

The first observable tendency relates to the players' failure to consider shouts as their ritual. Very few of the respondents considered them when filling out the questionnaire. This result may surprise me since I can conclude that most tennis players have their own and often original shouts through regular observation. Athletes use them after winning a point or a match – celebrating victory. Reflecting on the fact that shouts are not counted as rituals, the following conclusion emerges. The players consider this practice exclusively part of the game or their strategy. Thus, it is a highly automatic activity identified with the games' premise or concept. At the same time, it is not a ritual accompanied by complex symbolism.

Other customs whose presence was relatively low in the players' responses were practices of a collective nature. In general, each respondent focused only on describing individual rituals. In doing so, it is essential to confirm the fact that they are the ones that significantly predominate in the athletes' daily practices. However, observation proves that group rituals are also a widespread habit of athletes. Many professional tennis players are in the habit of eating dinner together with their team after a league match or competition. Regardless of the sports club attended, this ritual integrates the team and creates an aura of togetherness. It is a widespread practice that has become self-rule within the sport. Regardless of the result, every player seems aware that this ritual must be performed. Another supra-individual activity involves forgoing practice the day before games to spend it with teammates. This is a widespread practice that relaxes the player physically and mentally. The players spend time together so they do not think about the upcoming competition and thus do not get overly stressed. A vast number of tennis players use the cited ritual, and it can be said that it is also a strategic element through which the individual "clears his head". One can first point out that table tennis is primarily an individual sport to justify the lack of group rituals in the respondents' declarations. Consequently, rituals are associated with players in an individual and personal way. During the

competition, they mainly rely on themselves, and it is up to them to determine how the game turns out. For this reason, the concept of ritual can be equated by tennis players with individual habits correlated with the sport they practice.

Above were approximations of the rituals used by the players, the presence of which could not be ascertained by analysing the quantitative survey. This shows that long-term and systematic observation was valuable for collecting material, enriching and justifying general conclusions. Wanting to deepen the analysis of a given issue further, it would make sense to conduct individual qualitative interviews with athletes.

6. Verification of hypotheses and summary of study results

An essential part of analysing the survey results is subjecting the research hypotheses set earlier to verification. Their confirmation/rejection will be resolved based on the quantitative survey supported by observation. In one case, the Spearman test was applied, but with the rest of the assumptions, it was impossible due to the nominal nature of the variables used. The hypotheses in question will be restated below, along with assessing their relevance to the data obtained.

6.1. Rituals are a common phenomenon practised by table tennis players

Hypothesis confirmed. The quantitative study showed that 100% of the table tennis players surveyed use certain rituals associated with the sport (during training and/or competition). According to the results, it can be seen that the strength with which they correlate with particular individuals varies and depends on many factors. On the other hand, this does not change the fact that rituals are prevalent and overly used by tennis players.

6.2. The most common practices of players are body rituals

Hypothesis rejected. Despite the high popularity of the use of body rituals, the most significant number of athletes reported having artefact-related practices. However, it should be noted that both of the cited categories dominate table tennis.

6.3. The most common purpose of practising rituals by players is to increase their self-confidence

Hypothesis rejected. The purposes for which tennis players use their circadian rituals were highly variable. The intention to increase self-confidence was among the most frequently stated responses (70%). In contrast, players most often practice rituals to increase concentration (71.8%). As can be seen, this is not a large discrepancy, and both tendencies can be considered equally important.

6.4. The more superstitious the player, the more rituals he has

Hypothesis confirmed. It was interesting to test the correlation between superstitiousness and ritual use. The quantitative study concluded that superstitious athletes have 19.4% more rituals than non-superstitious people. Such a result confirms the above hypothesis and the assumed correlation between the two variables. Despite the above result, verifying the obtained result further using Spearman's test carried out in the SPSS statistical program for the quoted assumption was advisable. The strength of the correlation of the relationship between superstitiousness and the number of rituals used was measured. It oscillated close to a result equal to 0.6, indicating a moderately strong correlation.

In addition to verifying the hypotheses mentioned above, the study expanded knowledge regarding the peri-sport rituals associated with the niche sport of table tennis. Due to the limited research exploration of the social group in question, the results bring a certain amount of new knowledge. The study shows that the social practice area of athletes can be highly complex and exciting. It is worth studying to scientifically enrich sociological disciplines or sub-disciplines with further intriguing aspects of issues related to sports' social groups.

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FILM IS A WOMAN. THE MANIFESTATION OF FEMININITY IN THE WORK OF MARIA SADOWSKA BASED ON *WOMEN'S DAY*

Abstract. The aim of this article is to discuss a film by Maria Sadowska, entitled *Women's Day*. The main theme around which the artist decided to build its plot is Halina Radwan's herstory. A woman fulfils various socio-cultural roles, including that of mother, worker and woman, which exposes her to discrimination and exclusion. Feminist criticism therefore proved to be the primary tool used in the analytical process. The article refers to representatives of different research disciplines. The focus lies in capturing the relationships experienced by the main character in Sadowska's film, both within the private and public spheres. This is preceded by an introduction, which outlines the subject matter addressed by Sadowska, and accompanied by an overview of the basic assumptions of feminist perspective in film studies.

Keywords: film, Maria Sadowska, *Women's Day*, feminism.

FILM JEST KOBIEȚĄ. MANIFESTACJA KOBIECOCI W TWÓRCZOŚCI MARII SADOWSKIEJ NA PODSTAWIE *DNIA KOBIEȚ*

Abstrakt. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest omówienie filmu Marii Sadowskiej zatytułowanego *Dzień kobiet*. Głównym wątkiem, wokół którego artystka postanowiła zbudować jego fabułę, jest historia Haliny Radwan. Kobieta pełni różne role społeczno-kulturowe, m.in. matki i pracownicy, co naraża ją na dyskryminację i wykluczenie. Krytyka feministyczna okazała się zatem podstawowym narzędziem wykorzystanym w procesie analitycznym. W artykule odwołano się do przedstawicieli różnych dyscyplin badawczych, jak chociażby socjologii czy filmoznawstwa. Skupiono się także na uchwyceniu relacji doświadczanych przez główną bohaterkę filmu Sadowskiej, zarówno

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w sferze prywatnej, jak i publicznej. Powyższe poprzedzono wstępem, który zarysowuje tematykę poruszaną przez Sadowską, a także przeglądem podstawowych założeń perspektywy feministycznej w filmoznawstwie.

Słowa kluczowe: film, Maria Sadowska, *Dzień kobiet*, feminizm.

1. Introduction

It is no coincidence that I begin the title of this article by proclaiming “Film is a woman”. The phrase that “X is a woman” is used by numerous artists, creators and pro-women activists. This observation has become one of the guiding thoughts in the definition and crystallisation of art by Sadowska, who embodies feminist postulates in her music and film projects. The artist inaugurated her career as a teenager, when in the song “My wariatki ładne kwiatki” (We lunatics, pretty flowers) she engaged with the issue of sisterhood, girlhood friendship and breaking gender stereotypes (Sadowska, Eliza 2015). Although Sadowska confessed in an interview that “I have never been a big, committed feminist” (Gnoiński), she pointed out that the issues she addressed in *Women’s Day* (*Dzień kobiet*) led her to open up to feminist themes, resulting in her involvement in activities for women’s emancipation. The artistic path chosen by the director is characterised by disagreement with the patriarchal system of values and resistance to mechanisms that exclude women’s perspective from the public sphere. The observation of social phenomena enables a holistic focus on gender-related issues as a certain construct, which is highlighted in the piece “Nikt nie rodzi się kobietą” (Nobody is born a woman), in which the author uses a socio-cultural gender perspective. The song is a clear ideological enunciation and alludes to *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir (Sieńko 2021: 142), one of the trailblazers in promoting feminist thought, whose concepts continue to inspire researchers employing a feminist perspective in their discussions. The artistic awareness of the director and the timeless themes explored in *Women’s Day*, such as social exclusion, facilitate the attempt to analyse this film. This article focuses on describing the situation of women. Therefore, feminist criticism has been adopted as the main research tool, enabling the continued thematic proliferation of discussions surrounding the “women’s question” and challenging the prevailing status of “woman as an inferior being” (Helios, Jedlecka 2018: 90).

2. The problem of terminology – feminine cinema or women’s cinema?

To achieve the intended goal of discussing the proposed work, I consider it imperative to address the questions of what constitutes feminine cinema and whether such terminology can be deemed appropriate. An Internet search suggests that films for women are otherwise referred to as “girly films”, “touching romances” or “funny

comedies”. This may potentially lead to “associations with something chaotic, of little importance, emotional, which by definition is devoid of the element of rationality, reason and other qualities necessary to exercise power” (Radkiewicz 2001: 45). Therefore, it can be inferred that the phrase “feminine cinema” reproduces gender stereotypes. It presents an image of a woman as weaker and less reasonable than a man, whose desires, in this case artistic experiences, will be satisfied by an intellectually undemanding, pleasant and uncomplicated screen adaptation. It should be noted that the phenomena related to the emancipation processes, as well as the rise of gender mainstreaming¹ ideas, have resulted in the fact that entering the phrase “feminine cinema” into Internet search engines also allows one to discover the most popular female directors and films featuring “strong” female characters. This perspective seems closer to the values accompanying Sadowska’s projects, but still does not fully reflect the problems addressed by the director.

Małgorzata Radkiewicz draws attention to the terminological difficulty I have proposed. This film scholar argues that “feminine cinema” is commonly understood as a creation intended for women, however, its authors do not necessarily have to be representatives of this gender (Radkiewicz 2004: 301). Radkiewicz presents the evaluative factors I referred to above. She states that the category of “feminine cinema” denotes: “unsophisticated B-class productions providing emotions and tearful sentiments” (Radkiewicz 2004: 301). With this in view, the described phenomenon not only appeals to the traditional understanding of gender roles, but can also be defined as something inferior, negatively valued and perceived pejoratively (Talarczyk 2011: 81).

Therefore, I consider it justified to emphasise that the phrase “feminine cinema” fails to capture the subjectivity of the female director and confines her within the aforementioned gender stereotypes. Accordingly, feminist theorists have proposed the term “women’s cinema”, which I understand following the sociologist Ewelina Wejbert-Wąsiewicz:

film creation for which the underlying basis of identification lies in the adoption of a female perspective conveyed by the semantic structure of the work in question. Women’s cinema understood in this way is characterised by accentuating the female point of view, the place occupied by the female gender, their mutual relations and relationships with others. The focus of female directors usually revolves around female protagonists whose experiences, psyche and sexuality become the central theme and axis of the plot. In women’s cinema, the narrative, imagery or music highlight the specificity of the female world, while costumes and props co-create the

¹ *Gender mainstreaming – integration of gender equality issues into the mainstream of social and political actions, as well as an international strategy aimed at achieving gender equality in all areas of social, political, and economic life. [...] Its objective is to change social and institutional structures in such a way that they ensure equal treatment of all citizens and provide them with equal access to rights and institutions, which also includes the right to fully utilize intellectual and professional potential* (Limanowska 2014: 160–162).

female identity, along with the social, cultural and moral status prevailing at a given historical moment. It also entails breaking with the “male gaze” (Wejbert-Wąsiewicz 2015a: 47).

Adopting Wejbert-Wąsiewicz’s formulation of this concept allows for highlighting the autonomy found in projects undertaken by female directors. It also enables the creation of socially engaged art that takes into account the perspective of women, skilfully escaping the tutelage of the ‘male gaze’. It is therefore worthwhile to discuss further the concept cited after Wejbert-Wąsiewicz and note that, among others, it has been brought to attention by feminist literary criticism. In her book *Ciało, pożądanie, ubranie. O wczesnych powieściach Gabrieli Zapolskiej (Body, desire, attire. On the early novels of Gabriela Zapolska)*, Krystyna Kłosińska analyses *Kaśka Kariatyda* by Gabriela Zapolska. Through the interpretation of the main character, this literary scholar concludes that the “male gaze” often takes on an expansive form, which can lead to the woman feeling pain:

[...] the gaze of the man evokes in Kaśka a feeling of pain, humiliation, and degradation; in the girl’s imagination, the inner sensation transforms into visible wounds on the body. The male gaze forces the woman into stereotypes. If the pain caused by this gaze was to be externalised, if the metaphors of the text were to be “made real”, we would behold the woman’s body covered with the marks of lashes or charred. The man’s gaze destroys, incinerates, and ultimately kills. It is felt by the woman as a gesture of domination, branding the slave’s body, marking it with a scarlet stripe, the “scarlet letter”. At the same time, the male gaze activates the memory of the dark times when the bodies of witches and the temptress were burned at the stake (Kłosińska 1999: 40).

3. Halina Radwan – mother, manager, woman

Taking into consideration the analyses presented in the first part of the text, it can be concluded that Sadowska’s film work aligns with “women’s cinema”. Not only does the film tell the story of a woman’s life, but it also adopts a non-male-centric approach which captures the “multifaceted nature of women’s experiences” (Szczekała 2022: 79). The perspective offered by the artist encourages reflection on the world, addresses universal issues and, at the same time, in a non-superficial manner touches on topics that resonate with female and male viewers (poverty, exclusion, violence or sexual intercourse). Sadowska’s work is characterised by authenticity, which is reflected in the characters she created. The filmmaker focused on depicting the difficulties that the “mass viewer” may face, giving the viewer the opportunity to “find reflections of themselves and their problems on the screen” (Helman 2011: 34). The main character of *Women’s Day* is Halina Radwan, portrayed by Katarzyna Kwiatkowska. We come to know the woman as a middle-aged person, an employee of a retail chain called Motylek (Butterfly), the mother of a growing teenage girl, who has experienced abandonment by her husband, and whose living conditions are far from luxurious. The discussed character perfectly

fits the model of the exhausted, overworked Polish woman, for whom full-time employment is the sole motivation because without it she and her family would not survive. The greyness, routine and the lack of the right to self-fulfilment are the fundamental features describing the fate of the main character. Thus, Halina Radwan is presented as a member of society for whom the transformation after the year 1989 has not been kind. It is noteworthy that women in particular play a significant role in her life and it is, in part, around their experiences and relationships that the plot of the film is built. This is the case in both the private and public spheres. In the former, we should spotlight the main character's mother Regina Radwan (Grażyna Barszczewska) and her daughter named Misia (Julia Czuraj). Similarly, in the workplace, her colleagues are women. Portraying the roles of shop assistants are: Klara Bielawka (Andżelika), Dorota Kolak (Maryla), Anita Jancia (Jadzia), Ewa Konstancja Bułhak (Ania), Elżbieta Romanowska (Monika), Dorota Wierzbicka-Matarelli (Beata Karwowska). Halina Radwan's close circle also includes men. An undeniably important and symbolic character is played by Eryk Lubos, i.e. Eryk Gołębiowski, the main character's boss and lover. Leonard Pietraszak deserves a special mention for his role as the lawyer Gawlik, who later becomes a supporter in the fight for justice.

In her work, Sadowska broadly depicts the life of women, which is why the very first scenes of *Women's Day* are strongly marked by female figures. In these scenes, we meet the main character and her daughter; during their conversation we learn that the woman, portrayed by Kwiatkowska, has been offered new professional challenges – a promotion to a managerial position. However, the guiding thought was not joy, the desire for self-fulfilment or the appreciation of the employee, but the struggle for money. In this way, the director stressed one of the main problems raised in the film, namely the low economic status experienced by the later rebel. Financial instability, exploitation and the feminisation of poverty² form the foundations on which the narrative is constructed. Systemic violence shatters or prevents balance in family relationships. Miśka, the daughter of the main character, is saddened and annoyed that her mother, by accepting the professional promotion and thus new, further responsibilities, will have “even less!?” time for her (Sadowska 2012). Halina Radwan's thoughts continue to focus on the economic aspect. The woman is happy that she will most likely enable her daughter's academic development, she says: “For example, I will buy you a computer [...], and you will take part in this Computer Science Olympiad” (Sadowska 2012). The concerned mother desires the well-being of her child and does not have a concrete plan, her goal is primarily

² *Feminisation of poverty (deprivation) – a social phenomenon characterized by economic inequality based on gender, which can be demonstrated through sociological empirical research. [...] Over the past two decades, women have become the beneficiaries of socio-economic change to a lesser extent than men [...] The phenomenon of feminisation of poverty is influenced by the advocated and implemented family model, in which women work for pay but also have to take care of their husbands, children, and often parents* (Desperak, Rek-Woźniak 2015: 141–143).

to secure the best possible future for her daughter. So she does not find space for discussing dreams and desires. She does not concentrate on the value of money or work in itself, but on how to manage the economic capital associated with her career advancement. It is worth noting here that it is the family situation that has compelled the woman to assume the traditionally understood male cultural role – that of a person who will undertake the responsibility of ensuring financial liquidity for her loved ones. Consequently, we see that Halina Radwan has to take on stereotypically “female” duties that patriarchal oppression has assigned to women, as Katarzyna Rydzik (2011: 9) notes: “despite political and social changes, the modern woman still resembles the goddess Kali with seven arms, created to cope with all challenges”. The economic plight of the main character of *Women’s Day* has led her to bear the burden of financially providing for her family on one of her metaphorical arms.

The main character’s ennoblement seems to be an opportunity for her colleagues (all of whom are women) to abolish the inextricable division between better and worse employees. The fresh start is supposed to involve the appointment of their manager (the masculine form used consistently in the film), a person who has suffered the hardships of exploitation and poor working conditions accompanying those employed in lower positions, usually female cashiers. However, the revolutionary slogan “Down with management!” (Sadowska 2012) shouted by Maryla, one of the workers, at Halina Radwan’s birthday party, turns out to be a utopian wish. Entangled in the patriarchal-capitalist pursuit of money, the newly appointed manager has been forced to navigate within a system that exploits its “subjects”. Naturally, the start of a career in a senior position at the shop involves conscientiousness and understanding, which entails, among other things, fairer, partly truthful, filling in time records. However, in the course of a conversation with her boss, Eryk Gaşiorowski, the main character learns that standards such as those resulting from legislation, for example labour law, do not apply to the establishment she manages. The implication is that at Motylek no systemic solutions have been proposed, no laws regarding working conditions have been implemented. Instead, a change in attitude towards a more positive one has been suggested – ‘everything can be done if you really want to’ (Sadowska 2012), and the way to break the deadlock, the problem of the unpaid overtime, is simply to fire the employees.

The policy of the popular discount chain encompasses more than just the above-mentioned decisions of the supervisor. During the training session attended by Halina Radwan, we learn that the key word for achieving the company’s objectives is “productivity”. In order to realise this idea, the trainers suggested physical exercises and singing the “Motylek Anthem” (Sadowska 2012), which was intended to unleash energy and create a sense of community among the management staff. Professional advancement also involves increasing the prestige of private life, the main character decides to change her place of residence and purchase new appliances (including a computer for her daughter). However, the ennoblement also brings

a multitude of responsibilities associated with the new role, greater time challenges and rejection by some of her former colleagues. For instance, one of them, jealous of the promotion, accepts a delivery of products without informing her superior.

I think the most pivotal moment turns out to be Halina Radwan's willingness to defend female employees who find themselves in a challenging life situation – one of them is expecting a child, while the other learns about her husband's illness. However, as the shop managed by the main character ranks low in productivity, Eryk Gąsiorowski orders the dismissal of one of the women, saying: "you see, my bosses love numbers" (Sadowska 2012). The magnanimous man leaves the choice to the shop manager; if she does not terminate her subordinate's employment, she can resign herself. Halina Radwan decides to fire Maryla, whose husband dies shortly after the incident, and the grieving woman becomes an alcoholic.

The main character, consumed by the responsibilities associated with her new position and the lack of support from her boss and some of her coworkers, forgets about her family, especially her daughter Miśka. The patriarchal, oppressive system does not allow for a conflict-free combination of socio-cultural roles. The shop manager encounters male domination, which translates into phallogocentric social relations, i.e. "the universalisation of what is male, hidden at the base of culture, preventing the female voice, representation, symbolic existence" (Bator 2001: 61). Thus, the female employees of the establishment (including the new manager) function within an exploitative arrangement. They can expect no social assistance, no schemes to support single parents, and the unfavourable system for women has condemned them to parenting failures. The daughter of the main character stops going to school, starts smoking cigarettes and plays computer games obsessively, fanatically. These developments address the patriarchal desire to see the woman in the role of the "keeper of hearth and home". The mother's increased professional responsibilities have resulted in her daughter suffering. Feminist theories draw attention to this injustice. June Hannam, describing the concept of "separate spheres", makes it clear that it is 'a term used to describe different social roles. It was assumed that biological and social differences between the sexes affected both their personalities and their suitability for particular tasks. Thus, men were seen as rational, aggressive and competitive, and therefore fitted for the world of work and public activity, whereas women were emotional, nurturing and passive, and therefore most suited to look after the family within a domestic setting' (2007: 37). *Women's Day* demonstrates that the patriarchal system affects both spheres of life, which influence each other. Justyna Tomczyk's findings further support this notion, for, as the sociologist observes, "the range of patriarchal power influence is very extensive", encompassing aspects such as family, production and reproduction, and economic systems (2014: 171).

Interestingly, through reading interviews with the director, we can learn that Sadowska is an advocate of the egalitarian model of the family, which she has implemented in her own relationship, for example, through alternating childcare

responsibilities (Rutkowska 2017). Given this, it can be assumed that she has presented herself as a conscious director. Together with the co-screenwriter, Katarzyna Terechowicz, she succeeded in depicting the experiences of Halina Radwan and drawing attention to the dilemmas faced by overworked, overtired and frustrated women. I therefore think that the filmmaker has successfully and consistently pursued an artistic project which can be considered as bringing attention to the “women’s question”.

In the light of the above, it is necessary to recall the “still functioning model of a woman – the Polish Mother” (Ksieniewicz 2004: 93), which established its foundations in the times of the nobility (Titkow 2012: 29). It is understood today as the type of woman presented by Sadowska in *Women’s Day* – an exhausted caregiver tasked with fulfilling the role of a family manager (Imbierowicz 2012: 430–431). The socio-cultural gender perspective has led to the emergence of another concept describing the role of women in society. Researchers argue that due to the redefinition of certain phenomena, a new category has been constructed – the “superwoman”. This cited model goes beyond the traditional understanding of women’s duties (taking care of the family, the household etc.), as it also takes into account the labour market. Anna Titkow explains that a “superwoman” is a “wonderful mother, wife, employee” (Titkow 2012: 32), “who is able to meet the most difficult demands imposed by social reality. A person who is ready to give up her aspirations in the spirit of sacrifice for the Homeland and the Family, not expecting other than symbolic gratifications, thus gaining prestige and position in the family and society” (Titkow 2012: 30). It is therefore necessary to quote the observations of Henryk Domański. This sociologist, in his book *Zadowolony niewolnik. Studium o zróżnicowaniu społecznym między kobietami i mężczyznami w Polsce (A Grateful Slave. Study on Social Inequalities Between Men and Women in Poland)*, stresses that:

Capitalism, from its very beginning, has favoured the persistence of gender inequalities in access to professional roles. Unemployment and recession cycles, followed by a shrinking labour market, push social categories with weaker bargaining power into inferior positions. Women voluntarily or under the pressure of objective conditions choose domestic occupations, yielding professional space to men (Domański 1999: 23).

The state presented above, as observed by the researcher, is easily noticeable in *Women’s Day*. The main character, despite making every effort, fails to meet the requirements arising from her role in society, which Sadowska has keenly captured in the discussed film. Halina Radwan experiences failure, she does not fulfil the hopes placed in her, she is unable to satisfy the needs of others. The woman’s husband abandoned the family and left for the United States, and, despite her attempts to rebuild the relationship with her daughter and rekindle a sense of mutual trust and care, the main character faces defeat; furthermore, as a shop manager she performs her duties at a level that is, at the very least, unsatisfactory.

Another significant thread presented in *Women's Day*, which I consider important, is that the main character decides to enter into an intimate and confidential relationship with her boss, who takes care of his disabled wife. Sadowska portrayed romantic getaways and moments of elation as a time of detachment from daily professional and family obligations, as well as making difficult decisions. However, the most intriguing aspect of this story seems to be not that Halina Radwan chooses to become entangled in an affair, but rather with whom she consummates it. The character of Eryk Gąsiorowski can be described as follows: a capitalist boss, co-responsible for family dramas – the disturbed relationship between the main character and her daughter. The character also contributed to work-related failures – quarrels, disagreements between the manager and her former colleagues, and inhumane orders, such as the fact that “when one of the employees has a miscarriage, another one has to cover the customer’s corpse with a bag and open the shop” (Chutnik 2013). It should be therefore noted that apart from becoming a source of bodily and spiritual pleasure, the financier becomes also an allegory of the accumulation of the woman’s problems, and the bane of her life. An important moment in the story of Halina Radwan’s life is the betrayal of her lover with a newly hired female employee. As a result of the man’s infidelity, Halina Radwan distances herself from him and he decides to take revenge by imposing new responsibilities on her, which prove impossible to fulfil. Viewers witness further dramas that affect the main character. Halina Radwan is dismissed on disciplinary grounds and, with no prospects ahead, she falls into depression. Eryk Gąsiorowski does not feel responsible for the unlawful directives, moreover he bids farewell to his former manager and lover with the words: “You’ve broken the rules! Halina, you can go to jail. Don’t you get it!? I’m saving your ass” (Sadowska 2012).

However, despite the pain and suffering inflicted by him, Halina Radwan continues to have feelings for her superior. It is only when she realises that her former lover’s interest in reviving their relationship is aimed at having her sign a confidentiality clause that she decides to permanently end this acquaintance, which at the same time marks the beginning of a difficult, complicated battle of David against Goliath. In an attempt to raise awareness about working conditions in the popular retail chain, Halina Radwan initiates a media campaign, organises demonstrations and unites the professional community. Sadowska offers a portrayal of a strong, independent, and hardworking woman who, through spiritual renewal, unites her former colleagues. Thus, we can see that the director has used feminist values and created a courageous, self-reliant heroine who only succeeds by making autonomous decisions. Furthermore, *Women's Day* addressed the actual problems encountered by women, as their experiences were portrayed in the film and the plot revolved around them. Sadowska successfully aligns with feminist emancipation strategies, which aim to highlight the female point of view, amplify women’s voices, and present their own original narratives (Kłosińska 2006: 99–100).

It is also noteworthy that the main character’s attempt to defeat a large corporation and disseminate information about the mistreatment of Motylek’s female

employees impacts her family relationships. When unemployed, Halina Radwan faces criticism from her mother, who dies while her daughter stands up to the unfairness. Ultimately, Halina Radwan triumphs over the authorities of Motylek. However, it is important to point out here that she did not fight this battle alone: the shop's female employees were among those who contributed to her victory. The preceding events, the dramas described above, show that the women did not form a community. Toril Moi asserts that "each of us has had similar experiences" (Moi 1993: 102) and makes it clear that patriarchal oppression often affects all women, or at least they are exposed to it. I assume, therefore, that it was the commonality of experiences which caused the female shop workers to adopt a similar perspective. This resulted in them joining the former manager in the ongoing battle between good and evil. In relation to these findings, it is worth referring to the idea of sisterhood, which I understand here in line with Karolina Sikorska and Sandra Frydysiak as "acting in solidarity, supporting each other and fighting together. Individual experiences gain collective articulations, thus acquiring greater power and agency" (2020: 96). As Sikorska observes in another article:

sisterhood between the heroines only emerges when they find themselves in a similar situation, when they all begin to have problems at work, and when the economic exploitation of their employer proves equally severe for them. The competition inherent in the corporate logic largely eliminates opportunities for genuine female support and cooperation. It is only when the women (led by the main character, Halina) realise that the employer's practices benefit neither the individuals nor the team, that they are able to stand together in solidarity to fight back. Sisterly actions are initiated in response to a difficult situation, for some of the protagonists of the film's narrative already extremely distressing (Sikorska 2019: 39).

In the light of the above, it can be concluded that thanks to the fight, the shop employees have achieved one of the important postulates of feminism in general. This does not mean, however, that sisterhood was the main goal that the women sought to accomplish. It was born out of their collective acts of solidarity, when the recognition of a shared threat and the absence of alternative means to cope with adversity fostered mutual mobilization and support. Remarkably, such cases are well known from the herstory³ of women's social involvement. Titkow emphasises that

despite the lack of universally accepted conclusions regarding the nature of the relationship between the women's social movement and feminism, it should be accepted that feminism was born thanks to the women's social movement, and that the women's social movement in turn

³ *Herstory* – a neologism created by American second-wave feminists [...] as part of criticism of traditional historical writing; the wordplay *her-story* (*her narrative*) formed a counterbalance to *his-story* (*his narrative*). The rejection of the notion of history and its replacement by the word *herstory* was part of a broader critique and an attempt to change the patriarchal language, described by feminists of the time as *manglish* (*man + English, male + English*) (Kuźma-Markowska 2014: 179).

was able to emerge thanks to its animators and leaders, whom from today's perspective we would call feminists (1998: 214).

I also consider Halina Radwan's relationship with the attorney Gawlik, who did not charge for his services, to be worth mentioning. Through this relationship, the filmmaker broke stereotypes and demonstrated that cross-class, cross-generational and cross-gender solidarity is a value which proved indispensable for achieving the desired goal. The character of the plaintiff's attorney was portrayed as a selfless, kind-hearted and compassionate man, who altruistically engaged in the main character's case.

The above description is worth supplementing with a slightly more political approach, as the film's plot and the director's authorial idea are strongly inspired by feminist ideals – the fight against an exploitative, unjust system and social inequalities. This makes it possible to highlight several problems, which I draw attention to following Andrew Heywood. Characterising the ideology of socialist feminism, Heywood notes that it criticises the free market system and addresses the “institution of private property” (Heywood 2007: 262) as the bastions of patriarchy that exclude female citizens from the public sphere. According to Friedrich Engels, the abolition of the “mother right” (inheritance through the female line) led to “the world historical defeat of the female sex” (Heywood 2007: 262). Moreover, he also expressed disapproval regarding morals, concluding that the cultivated myth of romantic love imposes restrictions on women, and that its main task is to protect “male privileges and property” (Heywood 2007: 262). Eryk Gąsiorowski does not care about building a relationship based on partnership, security and love. The protagonist only seeks to satisfy his own needs in different spheres of life. Furthermore, it should be noted that the decisions made by Halina Radwan, which worsened the situation of the female employees, were influenced by her boss-lover, as mentioned above. The man thus becomes a metaphor describing the dependencies between the heroine and her workplace. By ending the relationship, Halina Radwan gains autonomy. This enables her to engage in a fight against the dishonest employer.

Sadowska illustrated that the patriarchal system, by overlooking women's unpaid work and imposing socio-cultural roles, led the main character to suffering, exclusion and a daily struggle for survival. Socialist feminism included in its tenets, among other things, the abolition of male property, which would result in women's economic and cultural independence (Heywood 2007: 262–263). Using this perspective, it is important to point out that the main enemy of female workers is not men, but oppressive, neoliberal capitalism. Obviously, the director made use of the portrayal of unfriendly and exploitative men driven by profit, such as Eryk Gąsiorowski. However, considering the presented analyses, it can be assumed that it was capitalism that socialised the ruthless financiers.

I consider it necessary to emphasise that the director has presented two types of characters. On the one hand, a picture of exploitative individuals is painted,

through the portrayal of the Motylek bosses; these are the people employed high up in the corporate hierarchy. On the other hand, we see people facing obstacles arising from everyday life, as well as discrimination or a lack of the right to dignity. Sadowska chose to employ a scheme known from westerns, as the director herself says: “In *Halina*, there is such an archetypal struggle between good and evil, and I often call this film a western, because it has such a scheme of a lone warrior who gathers allies in order to win against someone who appears stronger and invincible” (Jaźwiński 2013). Additionally, it is worth noting the issue of gender, as the group threatened with exclusion and poverty consists solely of women. The heroines are socially, economically and culturally disadvantaged shop workers, whereas in the dominant roles the director casts men. In view of this, I believe that *Women’s Day* is a film that manifests the community and solidarity of women. The work is also an authentic story, referring to the herstory of Bożena Łopacka, one of the employees of the Biedronka supermarket chain. In 2000, the public learned that the shop assistant “sued her employer for particularly harsh and unfair working conditions, which included having to work extra hours without pay and not being able to leave the till for hours, even to go to the toilet. Łopacka’s story was the main source of inspiration for Sadowska’s film” (Mazierska 2022: 283).

4. Conclusion

In the proposed work, Sadowska attempted to challenge the patriarchal norms of viewing the world and to oppose the “male gaze”, “which remains the underlying foundation of cinema based on the mechanisms of unconscious patriarchy” (Beinek 2008: 70). Even though *Halina Radwan* was promoted to a managerial position, she still functioned within a violence-ridden situation and played the role of a woman dependent on an oppressive, macho system. Furthermore, she received no support from the state or her employer, despite raising her daughter as a single parent. Through this, the director realises one of the demands of feminism. She gives voice to unrepresented and excluded groups and enables the narrative to be constructed from the women’s standpoint, opposing “their exclusion from the artistic and intellectual sphere” (Radkiewicz 2011: 124). In this regard, Sadowska has succeeded in highlighting one of the fundamental perspectives adopted by feminist criticism, that of turning to women’s experiences (Showalter 1993: 121; Hannam 2007: 148).

To summarize the article, my intention is to highlight several significant practices that the creator accentuated. Specifically, she explicitly refers to the validity of using feminatives while also acknowledging the intricacy of the Polish language. One captivating scene from *Women’s Day* features a dialogue between *Halina Radwan* and her daughter, in which the latter demonstrates to her mother how she earned money. The girl, playing a video game character, points out to her mother that she has disregarded the gender of the character and has used the masculine form,

generally considered universal: “And what did you get so much money for, that warrior?” the mother asks, to which Miśka enlightens her, saying, “Warriorress!” (Sadowska 2012). It is worth pointing out that throughout most of the film, Halina Radwan referred to herself as a “manager”. However, education has not been in vain, as in one of the interviews Halina Radwan introduces herself as a “manageress”. Interestingly, the change in the language of the main character occurs only when the woman begins her fight for justice against the discount chain. Here again, the authorship of Sadowska’s work can be noticed. Specifically, in one of the interviews, the director recounted a herstory from her life. While playing “captain” with her daughter, her daughter declares that “I am a girl, I am the captainess!” (Rutkowska 2017). Furthermore, Sadowska emphasises her femininity and requests to be referred to as a directress, not a director (Wiśniewska 2013).

Sadowska articulates the need to mark her gender not only by using feminine endings. She argues that taking on a “male profession” results in the expectation that a woman working in directing must become a man on set. This strategy is adopted by some Polish female filmmakers, including Agnieszka Holland, and Dorota Kędzierzawska (Wejbert-Wąsiewicz 2015a: 52). I would therefore like to refer to the visual aspects that, in my opinion, Sadowska drew attention to in *Women’s Day*. In particular, after being promoted to the position of manager, Halina Radwan changed her appearance, but it was not because of her autonomous decision. The reason for the metamorphosis turned out to be the order from the woman’s boss, Eryk Gąsiorowski, who said to the main character: “Ms Halina, we have such beautiful uniforms, and you still walk around dressed like a guy – in trousers. It’s not appropriate, you are the company’s business card” (Sadowska 2012). With this, I think Sadowska has illustrated that a woman, despite promoting herself to the position of a manager, is not free to make her own choices regarding her image. The customary domination of men has established that women must wear skirts and dresses. Here, the practicality of wearing trousers should be considered. Halina Radwan, even as a manager, did physical work. As such, trousers probably proved to be more comfortable and functional clothing. The main character conscientiously obeyed her superior’s order, respected his suggestion. However, she reverted to the more practical clothes when she embarked on the victorious battle against her exploitative employer.

The technique applied by the director has shattered the traditional understanding of sexuality. Through her lens, women undergo a transformation that liberates them from being mere accessories, objects of visual pleasure subordinated to men. Consequently, there has been a reinterpretation of socio-cultural roles strongly intertwined with corporeality. The female characters have been empowered, becoming self-determined and willing to redefine and change the world into the one that is more just and accessible to women (Radkiewicz 2015: 91–93).

It is worth noting that during the making of the film *Women’s Day*, the director also released an album with the same title. In interviews, the artist points out that it

was thanks to female camaraderie that she had the opportunity to deeply understand and present feminist ideals. Her songs were inspired by the works of eminent feminist researchers and essayists, such as Susan Sontag, Barbara Kruger and Simone de Beauvoir. The multifaceted collaboration with representatives of Polish women's movements, Katarzyna Bratkowska and Kazimiera Szczuka, enabled the presentation of cultural texts by world-renowned feminist figures (Wiśniewska 2013).

The above discussion constitutes only a part of Sadowska's rich, engaging, and non-male-centric art. However, I think that by describing the figure of Halina Radwan, one can conclude that in her work the director undertakes a critique of predatory capitalism (Węglarczyk 2013), and by paying particular attention to the situation of women, she expresses her disapproval of patriarchal oppression. Hence, it is worth quoting the rhetorical questions posed by Margaret R. Higonnet (2015: 388), who writes: "did women indeed have their own renaissance, romantic movement, their own modernism? Until the appearance of another formation, did they experience and inscribe their historical experiences in a counter-language foreign to male school education?" I think that the quoted words reflect the tactics adopted by Sadowska. The director is trying to make society aware that the failure to include women's perspectives and narratives of their problems will result in further years of exclusion, which, in her opinion, should be "spoken about loudly and fought against persistently" (Węglarczyk 2013).

In *Women's Day*, the director also breaks stereotypes surrounding the perception of feminism, which she discusses in one of her interviews (Wiśniewska 2013). Throughout the film, Sadowska exposed her feminist sympathies. Positioning herself as a "reformer", she defied patriarchal gender norms and told the herstory of a marginalised group (Wejbert-Wąsiewicz 2022: 46–47). In conclusion, it is worth noting that "Maria Sadowska was prohibited by the film distributor from using the word 'feminism' or stating that the film is about women" (Wejbert-Wąsiewicz 2015a: 52). Despite these inconveniences, she managed to create "independent, auteur" cinema (Wejbert-Wąsiewicz 2015b: 260). What is more, thanks to "its bold message, it belongs to a small group of socially engaged films, solidifying the author's status as a feminist director" (Ozimek 2015: 116).


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RESEARCH REPORT

**Beata Adryjan*** <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4337-037X>**MENSTRUATION POVERTY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF POLISH WOMEN**

Abstract. The article presents the results of a survey on the knowledge and experience of Polish women in the area of menstrual poverty. The article raises issues such as: respondents' knowledge of the symptoms of menstrual poverty, characteristics of groups particularly vulnerable to deprivation in terms of menstrual health and hygiene, as well as the impact of menstrual poverty on the lives of people experiencing it. The survey raises the issue of tabooing and mythicizing the topic of menstruation. Respondents were also asked about initiatives to combat menstrual poverty. The respondents' experience of menstrual poverty was also a key theme in the survey. The results of the survey indicate that menstrual poverty is an invisible and embarrassing subject, especially in Polish society. It is therefore essential to introduce into the public discourse an uninhibited debate on the psychosocial difficulties related to menstruation.

Keywords: period poverty, menstrual exclusion, menstruation, health and hygiene, taboo, mythization

UBÓSTWO MENSTRUACYJNE – WIEDZA I DOŚWIADCZENIA POLEK

Abstrakt. Artykuł przedstawia wyniki badania ankietowego, dotyczącego wiedzy oraz doświadczeń Polek w obszarze ubóstwa menstruacyjnego. Podjęto w nim takie kwestie jak: wiedza respondentek na temat przejawów ubóstwa menstruacyjnego, charakterystyka grup szczególnie narażonych na deprawację w zakresie zdrowia i higieny menstruacyjnej, a także wpływ ubóstwa menstruacyjnego na życie osób jego doświadczających. W badaniu poruszono problematykę tabuizacji oraz mityzacji tematu miesiączki. Respondentki zapytano również o inicjatywy na rzecz walki z ubóstwem menstruacyjnym. Kluczowym wątkiem w badaniu były także indywidualne doświadczenia respondentek w kwestii ubóstwa menstruacyjnego. Rezultaty badania wskazują, że ubóstwo

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menstruacyjne to niewidzialny i wstydlivy temat, zwłaszcza w polskim społeczeństwie. Istotnym jest zatem wprowadzenie do publicznego dyskursu nieskrępowanej debaty na temat psychospołecznych trudności związanych z menstruacją.

Słowa kluczowe: ubóstwo menstruacyjne, wykluczenie menstruacyjne, zdrowie i higiena menstruacyjna, tabuizacja, mityzacja.

1. Introduction

Meeting basic physiological needs is an essential foundation for health and well-being. Being able to take care of hygiene, including menstrual hygiene, remains an important condition for the psychosocial well-being of menstruating people (Cardoso et al. 2021: 1). It is estimated that the global population of menstruating people is now almost 2 billion people. Despite this, menstrual discourse remains socially and media tabooed (Kulczyk Foundation 2022: 5). World Bank data indicate that at least 500 million menstruating people face symptoms of menstrual poverty on a daily basis (World Bank 2018). According to the Central Statistical Office, 51.7 per cent of the Polish population is female (CSO 2020 after Kopiec 2020), but despite this, no systemic action is being taken to investigate the real risk of menstrual poverty.

Menstrual poverty (inability to meet menstrual health and hygiene, MHH) is defined primarily as a lack of access to menstrual hygiene products that is due to economic reasons. The World Health Organisation and UNICEF expand the definition of menstrual poverty to include elements such as the presence of obstacles to the ability to freely and safely exchange and dispose of used menstrual materials. Menstrual poverty also includes sanitary barriers to cleanliness and comfort, as well as constraints related to menstruating people's access to reliable information about the menstrual cycle (WHO/UNICEF 2012 after Tull 2019: 3, 4). The Kulczyk Foundation in its international report on menstrual poverty entitled *Bloody problem. Period poverty, why we need to end it and how to do it*, emphasises that a supportive environment in which the topic of menstruation is not tabooed and stigmatised also remains a prerequisite for effective menstrual health and hygiene management. Effective menstrual health management (MHM) encompasses both economic and social and interpersonal factors that interact with each other (Kulczyk Foundation 2020: 5). Over the past few years, a number of NGO initiatives have emerged in Poland that are actively working to lift the menstrual taboo and counter menstrual exclusion. There is a chance that as time goes by, the problem will begin to be recognised in Poland, and this may contribute to its eradication. The content of this article presents selected results from a study on awareness and experiences of menstrual poverty among Polish women.

2. Organization and conduct of the study

This article presents the results of a self-reported study carried out with 200 women. The quantitative study was carried out using an online survey, which was distributed via social media (Facebook) on a women's group (#Asaversi) and via instant messaging (Messenger). Voluntary sampling was used. Data was collected in June 2022.

According to the conducted scientific search, the issue of menstrual poverty in Poland has not yet been the subject of extensive scientific research. The main objective of the conducted survey was to obtain information on the extent of knowledge of Polish women in the area of menstrual poverty. The survey was constructed on the basis of two main research questions: What is the extent of Polish women's knowledge of menstrual poverty and ways to counter it? Do Polish women experience menstrual poverty and, if so, how? In many questions, female respondents were allowed to select more than one answer. Two questions were educational in nature.

3. Characteristics of the study sample

The survey was targeted at women. The vast majority of those taking part in the survey were women aged between 19 and 30, who accounted for almost 84% of respondents. Most of the women surveyed lived in cities with more than 200,000 inhabitants. The distribution of the remaining group of surveyed women, living in smaller towns and villages, was almost proportional.

Table 1. Socio-economic status of surveyed group of women (N = 200; in %)

	Respondents	Indications
	1	2
	< 18	5
	19–30	83
Age	31–45	7
	46–60	4
	61 >	1
	Rural	29
Place of residence	Town < 200 000 inhabitants	32
	Metropolitan > 200 000 inhabitants	39

Table 1 (cont.)

	1	2
Assessment of own financial situation	Very good/good	49
	Satisfactory	40
	Unsatisfactory/Difficult	10
	Refusal to answer	1
Education	Primary/Lower secondary	4
	Secondary	58
	Higher	38

Source: own survey

The survey used the criterion of assessment of one's own financial situation. One in ten respondents described their material situation as "unsatisfactory" or "difficult". Almost half of the female respondents (49%) assessed their financial situation as "very good" or "good". Female respondents were asked to indicate the highest education they had obtained at the time of the survey. More than half of the women surveyed had a secondary education, with 50% of the respondents declaring that they were continuing their education. The second largest group remained women declaring higher education.

4. Results of the survey

4.1. Knowledge of female respondents on the phenomenon of menstrual poverty

Respondents were asked if they had ever encountered the term "menstrual poverty". Over half of the responses were yes (54%), indicating, that as many as 46% of respondents had never encountered the term "menstrual poverty". This result may be indicative of the tabooisation of menstruation and related issues in public discourse. Respondents who declared ignorance in this area were familiarised with the definition of menstrual poverty to enable the women interviewed to participate fully effectively in the study.

To introduce the respondents to the study, they were asked to indicate, from a given cafeteria, the dimensions of experiencing menstrual poverty. The graph shows a fairly proportional selection of responses that are manifestations of experiencing menstrual poverty. Respondents most frequently (45%) indicated a limitation in their ability to purchase menstrual hygiene products in their preferred quantity and quality. It was possible to indicate any number of responses, including not indicating any of the options given. Each respondents indicated at least one of the symptoms of experiencing menstrual poverty, which demonstrates the interviewed women's understanding of the sources of the phenomenon.

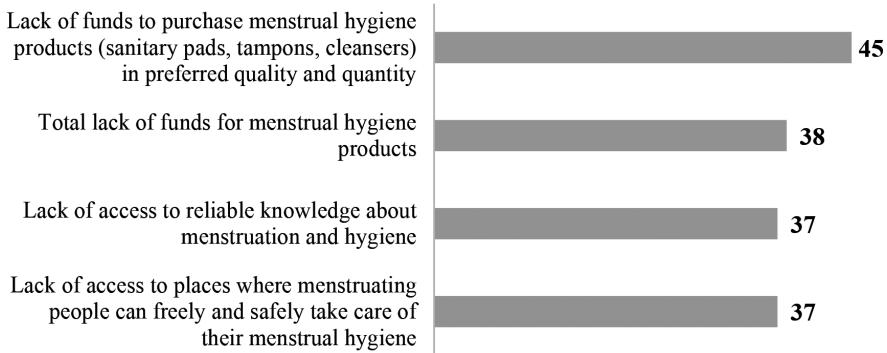


Chart 1. Opinions of surveyed women on how menstruating people experience menstrual poverty? (N = 200; in %)*

* More than one answer possible

Source: own survey

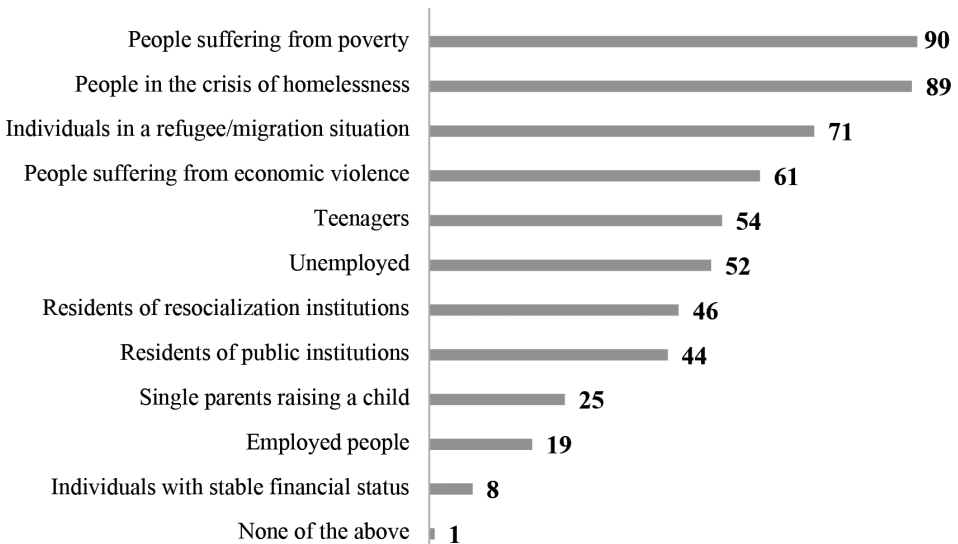


Chart 2. Vulnerable groups to experiencing menstrual poverty – in opinions of surveyed group of women (N = 200; in %)*

* More than one answer possible

Source: own survey

The study addressed groups particularly vulnerable to deprivation in the area of menstrual health and hygiene. Respondents were asked to indicate which groups of menstruating people they felt were particularly vulnerable to experiencing menstrual poverty. The most common responses indicated by female respondents remained, respectively, poor people, people in crisis of homelessness, people in a refugee/migration situation, and people affected by economic violence. Slightly

more than half of the indications related to unemployed persons and teenagers. Literature relating to menstrual issues indicates a particular proportion of teenagers among groups experiencing menstrual exclusion. Adolescents are reluctant to talk to those close to them about menstruation, which remains a plane of informational exclusion and results in stigmatisation, as well as risking poor management of menstrual health and hygiene (Difference, Kulczyk Foundation 2020: 30–36).

Noteworthy is that all respondents unanimously agreed with the statement that experiencing menstrual poverty has an impact on the lives of those affected. The majority of the women interviewed (66%) agreed, that experiencing menstrual poverty impacts on the lives of menstruating people to a very high degree, while 31% responded that the impact remains significant. 3% of female respondents indicated that menstrual poverty affects the lives of individuals experiencing it to a small extent. The above is supported by the conclusion, that menstruation remains a significant dimension that impacts on other areas of social life.

Previous scientific knowledge on unmet needs in the area of menstrual hygiene has indicated that menstruating individuals living in low- and middle-income countries are affected. New research leads to the conclusion that experiencing symptoms of menstrual poverty also remains a problem for women of low economic status in high-income countries (Kuhlmann 2019 after Cardoso et al. 2021: 2). One in ten female respondents in the referenced study expressed a lack of satisfaction with their current material situation. According to the information obtained, 8 per cent of them experienced at least one of the given symptoms of menstrual poverty. An interesting finding of the study remains that 11% of the respondents who had ever experienced a total or partial lack of funds to purchase menstrual hygiene products described their current material situation as at least satisfactory or better, and the place of residence of most of them was a city of more than 200,000 inhabitants. In order to find out opinions on the incidence of menstrual poverty in Poland, female respondents were asked about it. A not inconsiderable proportion of the women surveyed (93%) perceived the existence of the problem of menstrual poverty in Poland.

Interestingly, half of the women surveyed (50%) indicated stigma and feelings of shame as the most distressing consequence of experiencing deprivation in the area of health and menstrual hygiene. The literature highlights that experiencing stigma and shame negatively affects menstruators' life satisfaction and their ability to carry out daily activities, which translates into individuals withdrawing from society (Kulczyk Foundation 2020: 43). The referenced research findings indicate, that as often as psychosocial consequences, female respondents cited health consequences (39%). Research studies report that lack of knowledge about the treatment of infection and pain results in serious health problems (Kulczyk Foundation 2020: 43). Participants in the presented study prioritised the psychosocial effects of experiencing menstrual poverty over economic (6%) and educational (4%) consequences. Only two of the women interviewed (1%) did not indicate any of the stated consequences.

4.2. Respondents' knowledge of organizations and initiatives counteracting menstrual poverty in Poland

Almost all (96%) of the women surveyed agreed with the statement that the problem of menstrual poverty should be addressed by state institutions. Meanwhile, according to the previously cited studies, as well as our own observations, action in this area remains a grassroots initiative of NGOs. Since 2020, activists of the Periodic Coalition have been striving to bring the topic of menstrual poverty into the public debate and to change legislation, which resulted in the submission of a bill on menstrual poverty to the Parliament in June 2023 (Periodic Coalition 2023).

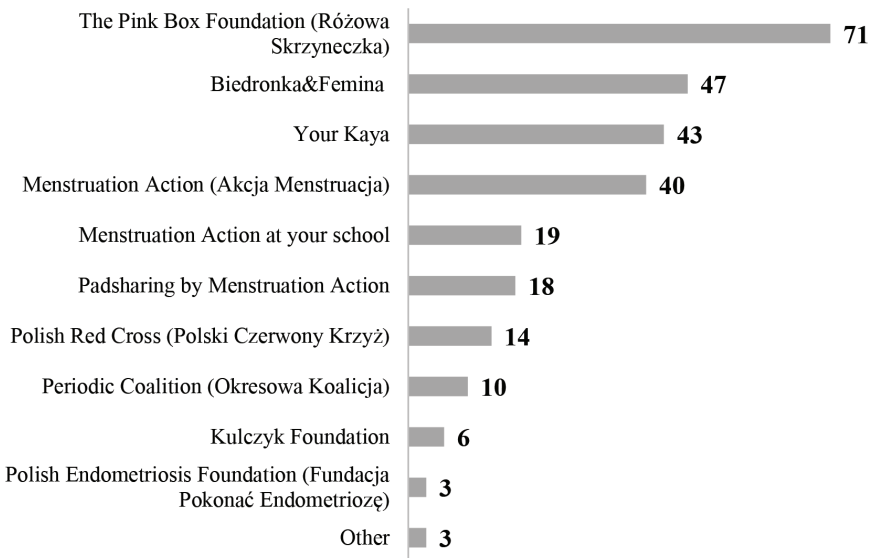


Chart 3. Knowledge of initiatives and non-governmental organizations that counteract menstrual poverty and attempt to abolish menstrual taboos – in the surveyed group of women (N = 102; in %)*

* More than one answer possible

Source: own survey

The survey asked female respondents about their knowledge of aid initiatives that remain aimed at intervening with people experiencing menstrual poverty, as well as popularising knowledge of this phenomenon. Slightly less than half of the female participants in the survey (49%) did not know how people experiencing menstrual poverty can get help. The topic of menstrual poverty and exclusion remains a socially tabooed phenomenon in Poland, but despite this, more and more initiatives are being developed in this area. Respondents declaring knowledge in this area (51%) were asked to indicate specific initiatives they knew.

The Pink Box Foundation remained the most frequently indicated answer (71%). Their activities focus on abolishing exclusion and menstrual taboos. The Pink Box

Foundation also focuses on educating, as well as soliciting for universal access to knowledge about menstruation and fighting for systemic change on perimenstrual topics (Pink Box Foundation 2023). The activities of the Kulczyk Foundation and the team of authors of the international report on menstrual poverty, carried out within the framework of the same foundation, were very rarely mentioned. The results of the aforementioned report remain one of the main sources of many articles, including academic ones, addressing the topic of menstrual poverty. The Kulczyk Foundation remains a semi-transparent background to organisations that actively initiate activities in the public space. In addition to the most frequently selected initiatives: Biedronka&Femina (47%), Your Kaya (43%), Menstruation Action (40%), female respondents indicated other, unmentioned organisations. These included the Still Foundation and Procter&Gamble.

4.3. Tabooisation of menstruation and the phenomenon of menstrual poverty

The exclusion of menstruating people from social life remains a consequence of the absence of menstrual issues in social discourse. The results of the referenced research show a high agreement of the women interviewed (88%) with the statement, that menstrual poverty is associated with a lack of conversation about menstruation. As the previously cited research shows, the tabooing and stigmatisation of the topic of menstruation strongly correlates with the emergence of myths about it. Furthermore, an overwhelming group of female respondents (90%) admitted to encountering mythicisation of the topic of menstruation. They were therefore asked to identify the myths they were aware of related to the topic of menstruation. The source of the given cafeteria of answers remains the publication Menstruation. A qualitative-quantitative research report prepared for the Kulczyk Foundation, which addresses the mythisation of the topic of menstruation (Difference, Kulczyk Foundation 2020: 18).

Table 2. Knowledge of myths and beliefs about menstruation in the surveyed group of women (N = 179; in %)*

Myths and beliefs	Indications
You cannot get pregnant during your menstruation	87
Menstruation must hurt	86
Physical activity should be strictly limited during menstruation	46
You should not bake cakes or pickle during your menstruation	40
Menstrual blood is dirty and toxic	28
You should not go to the dentist during your menstruation	18
Others	5
None of the above	1

* More than one answer possible

Source: own survey

The above indications are justified by the lack of access to reliable knowledge about menstruation. The multiplicity and prevalence of scientifically unsubstantiated, stereotypical beliefs about menstruation are not conducive to its taming in public discourse. The most frequently identified myths about menstruation related to health aspects and dimensions result in reduced social activity. A not inconsiderable proportion of the population believes in the myths about menstruation presented in the table, which may result in the self-marginalisation of individuals during menstruation. Female respondents also pointed to *culinary* myths. They associated certain activities, or more precisely the prohibition of them, due to the ongoing menstruation at that time. These myths included baking cakes and pickling cucumbers. In addition, two respondents supplemented the category of gastronomic myths with other forbidden activities, i.e. *making dumplings/cookies during menstruation results in failure*.

As indicated by researchers, the tabooisation of menstruation contributes to the marginalisation of menstruating people and, moreover, results in a lack of facilities and adequate sanitation that allow for comfort and hygiene (Tull 2019: 6). An overwhelming group of female respondents in this study (92%) believe, that society places menstruation in the realm of taboo topics. This results in a lack of social discourse of menstruation. Attempts to normalise this area remain rather superficial and are not undertaken systemically. Many advertisements refer to experiencing menstruation as *the days* and depicts the blue menstrual blood, which denaturalises this physiological phenomenon (Difference, Kulczyk Foundation 2020: 11). The information contained in the Kulczyk Foundation's comprehensive report reveals that menstruation remains a negative experience for one in four people menstruating. Furthermore, many adolescents face shame and fear of disclosing their ongoing menstruation (Difference, Kulczyk Foundation 2020: 23, 31–32). This article's own research also addressed the issue of individual experiences of female respondents. The questionnaire included a question about the experience of being ridiculed, excluded or humiliated during menstruation. Almost half (48%) of the female respondents had experienced any of the above situations during menstruation. The data is worrying, as it shows that menstruation still remains a socially embarrassing subject, causing many negative emotions and experiences, and marginalising the people experiencing it.

4.4. Experiencing menstrual poverty

Another issue that was addressed in the study presented here concerned the expenditure on menstrual hygiene. The majority of female respondents to the survey (93%) do not monitor their expenditure on menstrual hygiene at all. The survey questionnaire included an additional piece of information – a link directing respondents to a menstrual cost calculator. Thus, the survey was also applied. It encouraged to reflect on menstruation, as well as to try to estimate the expenditure on menstrual hygiene items.

As highlighted by researchers on the issue, the experience of menstrual poverty has not only economic and health dimensions, but also educational and psychosocial dimensions (Kulczyk 2022: 6). The complexity of the phenomenon of poverty and menstrual exclusion causes some difficulties in properly perceiving and defining it. In addition to the issues described above, the self-study also asked about the individual experiences of the women surveyed with regard to deprivation in the area of menstrual health and hygiene. It remains worrying that over half of the female respondents (55%) had been in a situation at least once in their lives that indicated that they were experiencing symptoms of menstrual poverty.

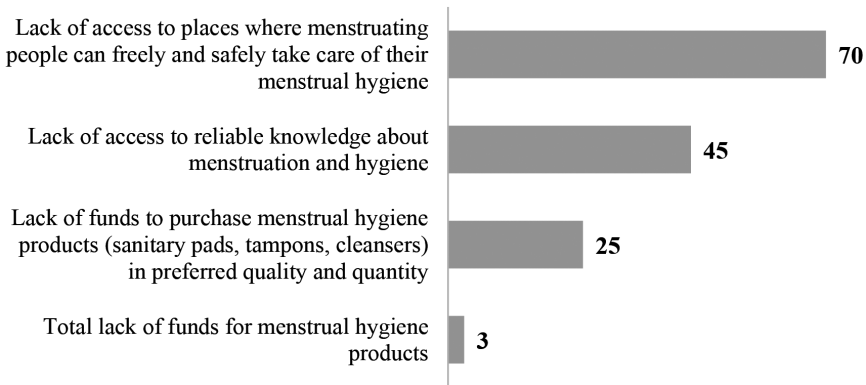


Chart 4. Experiencing menstrual poverty by the surveyed women (N = 109; in %)*

* More than one answer possible

Source: own survey

More than half of the women in the survey had experienced deprivation in terms of menstrual health and hygiene. The overwhelming majority of female respondents (70%) encountered with a lack of access to places to take care of menstrual hygiene in a relaxed and safe environment. In addition, slightly less than half of the women surveyed (45%) encountered constraints related to access to reliable menstrual knowledge. One in four respondents could not afford to stock up on at least once in her life of menstrual hygiene products in their preferred quantity and quality. 3% of the women surveyed experienced narrowly defined menstrual poverty, i.e. a complete lack of financial resources to purchase menstrual hygiene products. The results presented do not clearly indicate a high proportion of menstruating people who experience deprivation in terms of menstrual health and hygiene. However, the data shown articulates the frequent occurrence of situations in the lives of menstruating people that remain symptoms of menstrual poverty.

Respondents were also asked who they turn to for menstrual supplies. Respondents pointed to their immediate environment, as they usually turn for help to a partner, friend or other close person.

The women surveyed were also asked if they had ever had a menstruating person around them in whom they perceived symptoms of deprivation in terms of menstrual health and hygiene. The vast majority of women surveyed answered in the negative (78% of indications), while 6% of respondents refused to answer this question. 16% of the female respondents acknowledged that they had met a menstruating person who may have experienced menstrual poverty.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Educational level of female respondents and answers given

The vast majority (63%) of respondents declaring higher education knew what menstrual poverty is and how it manifests itself, while slightly less than half (49%) of respondents with secondary education had such knowledge. Among those who declared a primary education, ignorance in this area prevailed.

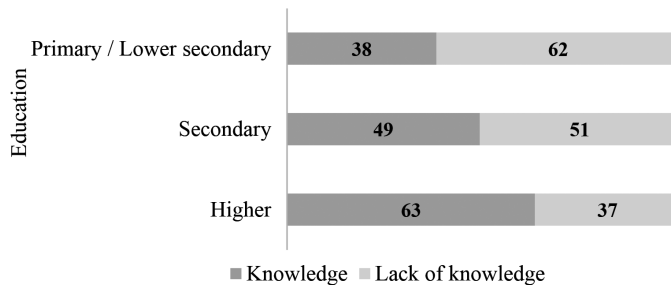


Chart 5. Knowledge of the concept of menstrual poverty and its symptoms by the respondents and the level of education (N = 200; in %)

Source: own survey

Women declaring primary, secondary or higher education participated in the survey. Only one person declaring primary education responded that she had encountered a lack of access to reliable information on menstruation. A complete lack of resources to purchase menstrual materials did not affect any of the women with higher education in the referenced study. 16% of the participants in the study who declared a higher education experienced a partial lack of funds to purchase menstrual hygiene supplies, in contrast to 11% among women with the highest level of secondary education at the time of the study.

The results of the survey show that, regardless of the educational level of menstruating women, they most often face a lack of access to safe places that allow them to take care of their menstrual hygiene with respect for intimacy and dignity. Menstruating people with both secondary and higher education experience menstruation-related information exclusion to a similar extent.

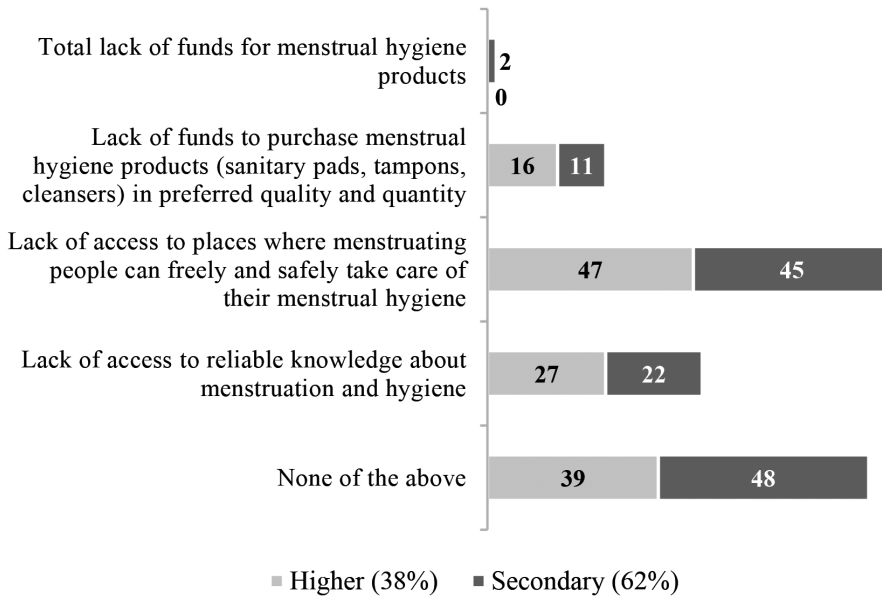


Chart 6. Experiencing menstrual poverty by the surveyed women and the level of education (N = 200; in %)*

* More than one answer possible
Source: own survey

5.2. Residence of female respondents and their answers

The results of the referenced survey indicate that the vast majority of respondents living in rural areas did not know what the phenomenon of menstrual poverty prior to the survey (63% of indications). Also a large group, 39% of respondents living in cities, did not know the term. The results of the presented study show that menstruating women living in cities, slightly more often than women living in rural areas, encountered a lack of access to places where they can freely take care of their hygiene. In turn, rural residents experienced menstruation-related information exclusion with greater intensity than urban residents. Furthermore, female respondents living in rural areas were slightly more likely than urban residents to encounter myths about menstruation. Mocking, exclusion or humiliation was encountered slightly less frequently by female urban residents than by female rural residents. Slightly more than half (56%) of the respondents living in rural areas had experienced menstrual poverty. A worrying finding is that as many as 91% of urban respondents have experienced at least one symptom of menstrual poverty at least once in their lives.

6. Final remarks

The study presented in this communication had two objectives – scientific and applied. The main aim of the survey was to find out the opinions and individual experiences of the surveyed women in the area of menstrual poverty. Through the information contained in the survey, the aim was also to increase the awareness and knowledge of the surveyed women about this phenomenon. Until now, not much research has been conducted on menstrual poverty. The scientific literature on the social dimension of menstruation is still insufficient and menstrual issues are an invisible and shameful topic, especially in Polish society. It is therefore important to introduce an unfettered debate on the psychosocial difficulties associated with menstruation into the public discourse. After all, the experience of difficulties by certain social groups and individuals and the associated marginalisation of menstruating persons has an impact on the functioning of society as a whole. It also remains necessary to conduct comprehensive and representative research on the real risk of poverty and menstrual exclusion of women in Poland. The results presented in this communication may constitute a premise for further, in-depth research on the discussed topic.

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PATTERNS OF LEARNING. COPING WITH SCHOOL FAILURE AND ITS RELEVANCE TO EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES IN ADULTHOOD

Abstract. Participation in adult learning is unequally distributed in terms of sociodemographic characteristics. One of the targets of public policy is to raise and even the level of participation among different social groups. In the article we concentrate on adults already taking part in non-formal educational activities, however, their attitudes, ways of participation and benefits from education differ significantly. The analysis aims to explore and link the experiences of compulsory education with those of adult education. School failures and ways of coping with them seem to be of particular importance. We also analyse the context, especially in terms of family capital and parenting styles. We identified two distinct patterns concerning lifelong learning – cumulative advantage and cumulative disadvantage, and present a few outliers. We argue that attitudes toward adult education and potential gains are determined by previous educational experiences within the school system.

Keywords: school failure, adult education, inequalities, lifelong learning, cultural capital.

WZORY NAUKI. RADZENIE SOBIE Z NIEPOWODZENIAMI SZKOLNYMI I ICH ZNACZENIE DLA PRAKTYK EDUKACYJNYCH W DOROSŁOŚCI

Abstrakt. Biorąc pod uwagę czynniki społeczno-demograficzne zjawisko uczestnictwa w edukacji dorosłych cechuje się dużym stopniem nierówności. Jednym z celów polityk publicznych jest zwiększenie poziomu udziału osób dorosłych w różnych formach edukacji oraz dostępności do

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uczenia się dla różnych grup społecznych. W artykule koncentrujemy się na grupie osób dorosłych uczących się w sposób pozaformalny, ale zwracamy także uwagę na różnice w ich postawach, sposobach uczenia się i korzyściach jakie osiągają z podejmowania aktywności edukacyjnej. Celem analiz jest uchwycenie znaczenia przeszłych doświadczeń, tych z okresu edukacji obowiązkowej, dla uczenia się w dorosłości. W szczególności niepowodzenia szkolne i sposoby radzenia sobie z nimi odgrywają tu dużą rolę. Analiza objęła także znaczenie kontekstu rodziny pochodzenia, w tym kapitału kulturowego oraz stylów rodzicielskich. Udało się nam zidentyfikować, znajdujące się na dwóch krańcach kontinuum, wzorce dotyczące uczenia się przez całe życie – wzorzec „skumulowanej przewagi” oraz wzorzec „skumulowanych niekorzyści”, jak również odstępstwa od nich.

Słowa kluczowe: niepowodzenia szkolne, edukacja dorosłych, nierówności społeczne, uczenie się przez całe życie, kapitał kulturowy.

1. Introduction

Adult education is a topic of particular importance, especially in public policy, including policies on social cohesion as well as on developing social and human capital. It is also part of the concept of lifelong learning, which emphasises that learning itself is a process of individual development that takes place at all stages of life – from the cradle to the grave. According to UNESCO’s report, the objectives of adult learning and education are: “to equip people with the necessary capabilities to exercise and realise their rights and take control of their destinies and to develop the capacity of individuals to think critically and to act with autonomy and a sense of responsibility” (UNESCO 2016: 10).

In comparative studies and analyses of the links between different determinants of adult learning, the focus is usually on socio-demographic factors, i.e., age, gender or labour market status (Boeren 2016; Guo 2010). What is lacking in analyses of the phenomenon is a theoretical framework explaining how previous school experiences and family of origin factors (cultural capital) shape involvement in learning activities at later stages of life.

In the paper, we argue that the learning process is located in the human biography and the socio-cultural environment. A learning trajectory is a process of constructing knowledge and building the resources and competencies for shaping adult learners’ educational practices.

On one hand, we focus on capturing different approaches to coping with the educational failures experienced during initial education. On the other hand, we assume that this stage of one’s biography is crucial not only for undertaking educational activities in adulthood but is also relevant for the course, dynamics and quality of this process. The main question we would like to answer concerns the links between experiences from initial and adult education.

We aim to delve deeper into the issues of coping with school failure by taking into account circumstances associated with the family of origin, i.e., cultural capital,

different parenting styles, and considering the importance of the school environment. However, the experience of failure per se is not a fundamental issue; instead, the main focus is on specific reactions, undertaken strategies, and the support received from the environment.

These issues were embedded in the biographical experiences of the respondents – adults, who had participated in courses, training and workshops during the 12 months preceding the interviews¹ (09–10.2021). We conducted 12 in-depth interviews² with people aged 25–64, diverse in terms of gender, educational background, and the social status of the family of origin. All the respondents recruited for the study resided in Warsaw. However, it is worth mentioning that the respondents' residential backgrounds during their childhood varied. Three of them originally lived in rural areas and moved to the capital city after completing their compulsory education.

During the interviews, we concentrated on selected stages of the respondents' educational path: primary school, educational choices and learning during adulthood.

2. The theoretical framework

In this paper, we focus primarily on the microstructural aspect of educational failure and its relevance to the educational biography of individuals. In the rich literature on the subject, especially in pedagogy and sociology, failure is considered in a multifaceted way, both in terms of causes, manifestations and consequences, as well as the opportunities to overcome them. Research on the phenomenon of school failure has been conducted in Poland since the 1960s by such researchers as J. Konopnicki, H. Radlińska, Z. Myślakowski, C. Kupisiewicz and Z. Kwieciński. Similar studies were conducted abroad by sociologists of education, for example P. Bourdieu and B. Bernstein. They provided significant descriptive and explanatory knowledge on the nature, causes and consequences of this phenomenon (Kojas 1998: 15).

¹ The study was conducted within the framework of the project: “Wspieranie funkcjonowania i doskonalenie ZSK na rzecz wykorzystania oferowanych w nim rozwiązań do realizacji celów strategii rozwoju kraju”, nr POWR.02.13.00-00-0001/20, co-financed by EU within the framework of European Social Fund, realised by Institute of Educational Research in Warsaw

² The study is a part of a larger project focused on examining the determinants of adult education. It complements the analysis based on quantitative research, which explores the significance of family background and cultural reproduction for learning in adulthood (Petelewicz et al., 2023). However, in the quantitative research, the variable under investigation was the very fact of engaging in educational activities in adulthood. To further characterize learning activities and demonstrate how the level of cultural capital influences individuals' sense of empowerment and reflection when making educational decisions in adulthood, as well as their awareness of the potential to leverage acquired knowledge to improve their social status, we used a qualitative approach.

The definition of school failure proposed by W. Okoń emphasises that it is “a process in which discrepancies between educational goals and pupils’ achievements appear and are perpetuated, as well as the formation of a negative attitude towards school requirements by young people” (Okoń 2004: 262). According to Kwieciński, school failure is a part of the exclusion system, comprising selection factors impacting school performance and educational choices (Kwieciński 2002). This emphasises the importance of social inequalities associated with the family of origin in succeeding and experiencing failure. However, the cited definition does not consider the aspect relating to the student’s agency and the results he/she achieved. It can be supplemented with K. Czarnecki’s proposal of perceiving failure in terms of the discrepancy between the effort a student puts into learning (self-assessment) and his/her school success as assessed by the teacher (Czarnecki 1998). Experiencing school failure is inevitable, “it always accompanies (in the consciousness of) learners, it is a ‘constant unknown’ occurring when undertaking and performing tasks that are new, difficult, numerous and especially when performed under difficult conditions” (Czarnecki 1998: 127). However, the adopted attitudes towards failure, implemented strategies, and outcomes seem to be crucial. We assume that coping with shortcomings can also be subject to structural determinants rooted in a socio-cultural context. Especially socio-cultural factors, like family, the school (teachers) or the peer group, as well as psychological factors, are important for dealing with setbacks at school.

Family attitudes, values and experiences influence the greater likelihood of a child’s success in school (Dąbrowski, Żytko 2007; Fitzmaurice, Flynn, Hanafin 2021; Lareau 2000; Ball 2003; Yu, Liu, Guo 2022; Mikiewicz 2005; Dudzikowa, Wawrzyniak-Beszterda 2010). The educational success of children with higher levels of cultural capital is favoured by the fact that they integrate themselves better into the educational field (Bourdieu, Passeron 1990). How the student copes in this field depends on their disposition to perceive reality and their disposition to act (embodied capital), which in turn strongly relates to the socio-economic status of parents. In the model described by M. Kohli, the mainstream education system and “the qualification levels and profiles it defines determine the starting point, certain initial opportunities, and the direction in which an individual’s life can then develop, and consequently also determine his or her social position” (Alheit 2011: 9). In general, qualifications acquired later do not create the possibility of correcting previous biographical choices (Alheit 2011). A school is a key place for practising formal learning, and by internalising specific educational content, individuals also learn certain methods of learning which are important for the next stages of one’s biography.

3. Past learning – the importance of coping with school failure

During the interviews, the respondents were to reconstruct memories concerning school life, prevalent practices of learning, experiences of successes and problems in school, functioning in the peer group, and relationships with teachers and parents. Failure was not explicitly mentioned either in questions or in answers. However, during analysis they were distinguished. The discrepancies between the goals set by the school and teachers and the results achieved, as well as inconsistencies between the effort and the results, were categorized as failures.

Based on the analyses, certain patterns of experiencing shortcomings during compulsory education can be identified, as well as the strategies for coping with them. The most acute failures for the respondents were what we can call cumulative, successively accruing failures – from small problems with understanding the content of lessons and teachers' instructions, then obtaining bad grades, to the lack of promotion to the next grade, and in extreme cases – dropping out. Such a course of events is always related to the complex, multivariate set of triggers. It is worth mentioning that cumulative school failures happen not only to children with underprivileged backgrounds. However, for those interviewees, they had more profound consequences and often determined their further educational trajectory. Especially since problems at school were often accompanied by problems in the family, i.e., poor relationships with parents, domestic violence, and material deprivation. In the respondents' memories, parents' efforts were focused on providing for the family and securing basic needs. In terms of offspring education, they expected no more than a lack of problems and "passing from grade to grade". The mentioned descriptions can be characterized in terms of the authoritarian parenting style, in which the parents demand but do not support, where they expect problems to be overcome, but at the same time do not allow autonomy (Baumrind 1966). In the interviewees' memories, parents appear to be absent, alongside, not supporting their development, and at times demanding.

The most important thing was to attend school, that there should be no complaints at the parent-teacher meeting... anyway, my mother was mainly interested in there not being any complaints, that there should be some sort of grades. (IDI_1)

It is characteristic that learning which is not supported in the family does not become an autotelic value for the respondents either. They had a very limited pool of options for coping with failure, both in terms of taking independent action and adopting an active approach. The spiral of school problems without experiencing success reinforces the "poverty of aspiration" phenomenon. In the respondents' stories, efforts to cope with the situation tended to focus on slipping through "from grade to grade", which amounts to adopting a strategy of "just to pass, just to finish school", but without making an effort.

Sometimes it was possible to copy something from classmates, sometimes teachers “stretched the assessment”. (IDI_8)

For these interviewees, the problem with meeting school expectations usually appeared already in the first stage of education, as a result of deficits in the initial resources obtained in the family, such as the possibility of forming language competencies or acquiring cultural codes recognised by the school. There is a lack of information in interviewees’ stories about any support obtained in breaking the streak of failures either from parents or teachers. The former rather excluded them from the educational field, labelling them instead of offering help or positive encouragement.

An accumulation of school failures can also occur because of the discrepancy between effort and achievement. In one case we identified the difficulty of breaking the spiral of negative events, despite the efforts of the interviewee and support from parents or teachers. He did not experience the deprivation of basic needs and had positive experiences and role models from home relating to learning. The family of origin was characterised by high cultural capital, the parents were multi-dimensionally supportive of their son and provided opportunities to acquire experiences and competencies outside of school – numerous trips, spending time together and being surrounded by books. As he points out, an appropriate diagnosis of his problems was lacking and attempts to support him were ineffective, despite strong commitment, especially from his mother. Growing school anxiety led him to an accumulation of problems already in primary school, at first bad grades, then too many absences, lack of progress from one class to another, and finally the need to change the school. Escape strategies emerged in this situation – escape in the literal sense, such as truancy, or shying away from actively engaging in school activities and seeking a safety valve in the world of literary fiction or computers.

The more I didn’t go to that school, the more I skipped school, the more I fell behind academically. The more I fell behind in my studies, the greater the fear was. The greater the fear, the more I didn’t go to school and it went round and round in circles like that. (IDI_12)

A recurring theme in the interviewee’s recollections is the motif of being not understood, the failure to find the cause and providing systemic help and at the same time being “pushed out” by teachers to another class or another school.

Well, those teachers just pushed me out of that school, really, somehow, they dragged me out of there by my ears with those D grades. I also got them to take pity on me and somehow... it was hard for them to keep me there until I was 20. (IDI_12)

Situations like this can lead to dissonance, on the one hand, identification with educational values, on the other the lack of results and dropout.

I did very poorly in school, I didn’t attend classes very much, I skipped school a lot and today, with hindsight, I know that it wasn’t so much due to laziness, but simply to fear and this fear accompanied me for a very long time in my adult life. It wasn’t until six years ago that I really

got over it. So that's how it can be with fear, we run away from certain things and my escape was skipping school at the beginning and well that didn't go very well, right? (IDI_12)

In all the narratives mentioned, the interviewees referred to multidimensionality and the accumulation of problems. Demanding situations were storing up and affecting each other, obstacles arise not only at school but also in other spheres of life; like relations with the family and peers, affecting self-perception and in extreme cases even prevalent anxiety. Lack of support and cumulative failures determined the further educational trajectory. This led to the perpetuation of a passive attitude – giving up and accepting the situation as it is or seeking a safety valve in the form of escape. The spiral of shortcomings in all these cases leads to the internalization of a negative image of the school as a whole – teachers, peers and the process of learning.

The situations described above represent the most obvious cases from the conducted interviews. Experiences of occasional but not severe failures were more common. They seem more like ordinary situations for the majority of students; deterioration of grades, problems with mastering the material from a particular subject, or the risk of getting an unsatisfactory grade at the end of the semester. They occur due to temporary neglect caused by focusing on other interests, problems with adaptation in secondary school, e.g., higher demands from teachers, the impact of the reference group or a family's problems. However, these failures were usually accompanied by experiencing successes in other areas of the educational field or other spheres of life.

The differences between these respondents emerge from the possibilities and ways of coping with school shortcomings. It seems that reactions to failure and the possible actions that could be taken are related not only to the family's cultural background but also to the attitude adopted by parents when faced with the emerging school problems of their children, in particular the level of granted autonomy.

The interviewees mentioned above come from families with relatively high cultural capital. According to reproduction theory, they acquired dispositions enabling them to function better in the educational field and adapt to the systemic expectations of school (Bourdieu, Passeron 1990). Usually, these interviewees identify themselves as good, above-average students.

The family attitudes and values reconstructed in the respondents' narratives refer to knowledge and learning as important determinants of educational success. However, the parents' expectations of what this path to success should look like seem to differ. From the attitude that knowledge is a value in itself, that regularity and independence are more important than grades, to focusing on good grades, praise from teachers, keeping neat notebooks and making the "right" choice of educational path (in line with the expectations of the social environment). It seems that these parental attitudes may shape different types of approaches to learning – learning based on freedom of choice, versus learning founded on doing what one is told and having a sense of obligation.

My mother pressured me a bit. I had the sort of mother who came and checked everything. You know, now in perspective, over time, I believe that this was very good because some parents were like not interested [...] My father was especially nervous about such things... most likely I wouldn't have any vacation, I'd have to study and he'd be watching me the whole time. (IDI_10)

Not for grades. Knowledge is supposed to be knowledge and that's it. Sometimes it's that you know, well.... in these schools these grades are not directly proportional to the knowledge that the student has, whereas with me it was always the knowledge that mattered. (IDI_2)

Each of the interviewees experienced temporary turmoil during secondary education. Patterns of learning that worked well in primary school appeared to be no longer adequate. Usually, the failure was a consequence of higher expectations from teachers that interviewees were unable to meet, a change of peer group or difficulties in the adaptation process.

In primary school, I literally didn't have to do much, I didn't need to put in any kind of effort and those grades were somehow always very good. I mean I always did my homework nicely, but I never had any problems. (IDI_10)

Encountering setbacks led to the implementation of different strategies. In several narratives, modes of action familiar to primary school were undertaken, i.e., bending the rules to meet the expectations of teachers and parents, such as cheating or copying homework. We can also identify escape behaviours in these narratives: concentrating on those subjects where learning is satisfying and success is experienced, engaging in truancy, avoiding taking tests at the first deadline, or escaping into extracurricular activities.

I was always sick for the first test date because, for the make-up test, I would just take a folder because supposedly this helped me write more comfortably and I had these notes in that folder which my mom would still help me write. So... but I really liked biology and chemistry, for example, [...] there were even some competitions in chemistry and so on, so that's what I studied, and the things I didn't like were set aside. (IDI_7)

The respondents' recollections also show the different reactions of parents to emerging problems and failures. These reactions are part of the specific parenting styles – ranging from authoritative, through permissive, to an authoritarian style.

The authoritative style identified in the interviewees' stories is mainly characterised by the fact that the parents were supportive, but not overprotective. They did not do homework for children, giving them space so they could decide when and how to learn, as well as autonomy to pursue their own interests and extracurricular activities. In demanding situations, they looked for solutions together with their children – setting a plan or seeking external support in the form of tutoring. When confronted with minor problems, parents tend to expect independence in addressing them, rather than monitoring the effects and stepping in when there were inadequate results. An openness can be observed among the respondents

with regard to informing their parents about emerging problems. Recognition of the problems, seeking solutions and support from parents were factors preventing the accumulation of failure.

The situation differs when parents limited the child's autonomy. Some respondents recall that parents usually did the homework for them, contacted teachers and negotiated their grades with them, actively sought alternative opportunities (e.g., finding another school), and also involved their social capital or paid for tutoring.

In some cases, respondents recall that the parents' reaction to school failure was extremely negative and involved punishment for bad grades, disciplining and increased control. The level of autonomy was limited, parents also intervened in the choice of interests as well as in educational choices. In extreme cases, prohibitions included imposing restrictions on the ability to pursue one's interests and participation in extracurricular activities. It should be noted here, however, that this authoritarian style in the case of parents with higher cultural capital, unlike those lacking it, was associated with high educational aspirations for their children, and thus the expectation of success in the form of good grades, acceptance to the top schools, obtaining a higher education.

No, they thought I shouldn't be involved in sport, they just.... you know, they lived through the war, those hard times, and they thought that.... how to put it, well I think it was because, you know, it was hard for them in life. (IDI_10)

From the collected narratives, we can identify specific patterns of coping with school failure. Particularly in the case of having a low socio-economic status combined with an authoritarian parenting style, there is an accumulation of school failures, experiencing failures that are difficult to cope with, a lack of opportunities and support, both from the family and the school environment and a lack of experiencing success. In the case of respondents from families with low or high levels of cultural capital, but with an authoritative, supportive parenting style and no accumulation of problems and failures, active coping and overcoming barriers can be identified. The level of autonomy granted to the child also seems relevant here, which usually accompanies an authoritative parenting style, but can sometimes also be a side-effect in the case of those respondents whose parents represented a neglectful style. In the case of respondents who were guaranteed a high level of autonomy, we can speak of the respondents adopting a proactive attitude (initiative-taking) towards school failure, which is also a role model in the family. It is characterised by accepting information about failure/reflection that leads to action, actively seeking help and support (talking openly about problems with people who can help, determining solutions together), setting goals (sometimes together with parents or teachers) and planning. In this situation, the experience of failure can be seen as a valuable lesson. It teaches perseverance in the face of barriers and setbacks, reflecting on the causes, being proactive, setting goals and putting the effort to cope with them.

Ultimately, these experiences, especially if accompanied by success in other fields and support from the social environment, can also contribute to a stronger sense of self-efficacy, more autonomous educational choices in the future, and more autonomous ways of learning.

4. Learning as an adult

Empirical findings show that adult learning is most often undertaken in relation to work (Petelewicz et al. 2023; Czarnik et al. 2022). However, from the perspective of the individual, participation in educational activities has a much broader range of functions and benefits. As T. Schuler and D. Watson point out, “learning reinforces the power to take control of one’s own life” (Schuler, Watson 2009: 7–15). It relates to various dimensions: cognitive, emotional and social; it helps to build social capital and open up new avenues of personal development and confidence (Illeris 2007).

Most of the interviewees undertook training directly related to work, although not solely concentrated in the professional sphere. While the link between work and educational activity is a unifying element for the participants of the interviews, learning is far from a homogeneous experience for them. Delving deeper into the narratives reveals that our interviewees’ attitudes and perceptions of the process or its benefits differ significantly.

4.1. The practices of learning as an adult

For some of our interviewees, learning in adulthood seems to be a part of their lifestyles, and even daily routines. They view adult learning as an immanent part of a career, both in terms of developing and maintaining a professional position. Undertaking learning activities is treated naturally, interwoven with other activities in the field of professional work, often as a stage on the way to achieving a specific goal on the career path. Interestingly, in a few narratives, taking part in educational activities is perceived as a solution to various life problems, or simply to increase effectiveness in different areas. Such a high level of commitment and trust in learning as a means to draw closer to achieving a specific goal is combined with a good understanding of the various offers of adult learning and openness to participate in different forms – remote, on-site, webinars, forums, etc. The level of commitment and reflexivity is high, those interviewees see the wide range of gains that are associated with learning activity in adulthood.

I’m constantly looking for myself, I don’t know if I’m looking... I think it’s worth developing myself and I’m looking for training, courses, webinars that are out there somewhere. I think those are the areas I should be developing in. I don’t know, I think everyone should develop themselves, let’s start with that, whereas I look for what’s close to me or what I need at the time. [...]. I only

gave the last ones that I remember, which was one parenting workshop, on how to deal with difficult emotions in children. I can't quite remember the title because I was reading such a book at the same time, *Difficult Emotions in Children*, but generally that range, whereas in the last year, I've attended a few times different pieces of training, webinars about developing your financial intelligence in different ways. (IDI_4)

First of all... because I am... I get bored quite quickly and if I do something for too long, if I sit in a certain field for too long, I feel as if I were committing internal suicide, as if I were dying, well, I just feel bad and I need some stimuli for something to happen in my life, a positive one, it is worth mentioning because I can also find negative ones. And I simply need challenges, so for me, this training is first and foremost... by the way, I'm also planning a few other training courses, but they're not related to the construction sector at all, so... but we'll see how it goes. So, the main motivation was that I need these challenges and some novelty, the other thing is, as I've already encountered, describing all this technology, that there are really a lot of elements there that you can test yourself in. (IDI_12)

A high level of commitment manifests itself also in extending the practices of learning. Participation in training is just a part of the whole process, involving also self-learning and learning from the other participants, as well building information resources. Not less important is the development of social capital, establishing relationships, creating communities around certain topics, especially in the form of closed groups in the digital sphere and drawing on the know-how of the facilitators.

Yes, I mean now we are in constant contact, there is a closed group on Facebook but a pandemic has just broken out, well I called this guy and he helped me put together such a strategy on how to lower the price of the premises because I was paying 4 thousand for the premises, this girl didn't want to come down from the price, but he prepared me in such a way that I was paying a thousand zloty a month, so I was ahead by 3 thousand every month for a while. (IDI_7)

Active users of adult learning opportunities are becoming more proficient in navigating the field of adult education, they have competencies enabling them to select offers tailored to their needs. They have strategies for how to search for and check available options as far as methods, forms, themes and tools are concerned. Conscious users have certain expectations and are looking for high-quality learning opportunities. Participation in educational activity is treated as an investment with the expectation of a specific return. They are active in the process, and are characterised by a high degree of agency and determination, ready to subordinate professional or personal plans to the action, and even to take the risk of borrowing money to invest in a course.

We can also identify an attitude that can be characterized by a kind of withdrawal even when one is taking part in adult learning. This approach is common in cases where interviewees were engaged in a learning activity out of necessity. Learning in adulthood is not part of a deliberate strategy or positive choice, rather it is a requirement arising from the expectations of an institution, i.e., an employer or a job centre, and decision-making is limited. Learning something new, acquiring a skill or taking

part in an activity with the possibility of having one's skills validated in the form of a certificate, is seen as something that must be done due to external expectations.

I: The initiative? Actually, together with the client, because we'd been doing such work in such a production hall for some time, and in the end the person responsible for OSH wanted us to take a course, which actually is required, so we decided that we had to do it, there was no way out, really.

M: So, there are regulations so that...

I: Well, if you use lifts... I mean, if you want to operate them, you should have taken a course, actually, you must. (IDI_6)

The approach is entirely pragmatic and geared towards obtaining the appropriate credential, motivation is derived from external requirements, so the educational activity is perceived as imposed and does not feel natural. The perception of training as an obligation implies the limitation of the selection process. The offer is often indicated by an external entity, in other cases the key criterion is accessibility – geographical proximity or the ease of taking it, the closest offer is accepted, imposed by the employer, or simply the one available “by happenstance”.

The transmission of patterns from formal education can be identified, especially in terms of relationships with trainers, acceptance and even expectation of hierarchical order. There is a tendency to take on the passive role resembling traditional teacher-student relations, a lack of criticism and not asking even when the trainee does not know what the learning outcomes will be or what opportunities could result from completing the course or receiving certification. Sometimes it is even the case that trainees continue participation in educational activity even though it does not match the needs and initial competencies of the trainees. Moreover, as many educational activities are moving to the Internet, this form is chosen because of its greater accessibility, especially by those who have difficulty in travelling to stationary classes, e.g., due to the distance, lack of public transportation or family obligations. However, the effectiveness of distance learning is limited by low digital competencies and intimidation, compounded by the lack of direct contact with the trainer.

Well, I'm glad I have the organiser's e-mail, but I don't use it, because I look for solutions on my own and there... well, because... gosh, if I were to write that I have a problem with it, it'll be stupid, it'll be in writing... and so if I ask, I'll already know and I'd click there and do it, otherwise I won't know. And that form of the questions, when you don't know something, to write it in an e-mail, I don't like it that much. I prefer to postpone it for a while, okay, maybe it will come to my mind, maybe something... and that's it. (IDI_9)

The educational system and later contacts with institutions (e.g., the labour market) biased the attitude towards learning organizations and the process itself. These factors contributed to withdrawal, a lack of criticism and agency. Adult learning is not treated as a market service with regard to which the provider is obliged to ensure certain quality, and where the participant is perceived as a fully-fledged customer who can ask or question the way the course is taught.

In the case of extrinsic motivation to the educational activity, engagement in the learning is limited – cognitively, emotionally and socially. It is not seen as an opportunity to establish social relationships and gain information about other educational or professional activities – building social capital – but as a necessary task to be completed. Consequently, the potential for wider impact is limited compared to those chosen more consciously and with a foundation based on intrinsic motivation.

5. Educational patterns – initial and adult education

The analysis shows that past experiences from compulsory education are also significant for participation in adult learning. Considering the trajectory of the respondents from the perspective of learning at different stages of life, we can speak of continuity. We can identify patterns that correspond with findings of structural sociology regarding the inheritance of inequalities, reproduction of the socio-economic status, and the accumulation of capitals, etc.

5.1. Cumulative disadvantage pattern

The most pronounced pattern in the narratives of our respondents is that of “cumulative disadvantage”. Disadvantage starts as early as the stage of primary school; the lack of experience in coping with difficulties fosters a sense of alienation from the institution of school as well as the learning process. Exclusions caused by the low socioeconomic status of the family of origin and lack of competencies valued in the educational field are strengthened by a lack of support. This translates into withdrawal, escape behaviour and the enduring perception of school as an oppressive place where one has to be. Moreover, a characteristic of this pattern is a lack or limited activity and, at the same time, opportunities to accumulate positive experiences in extracurricular activities. Limited opportunities to make choices and to experience successes translate into a lack of self-efficacy, agency and subjectivity in educational processes in the future. Experiencing an accumulation of shortcomings and a sense of failure to meet the expectations of the school fosters the perpetuation of a sense of insecurity towards the educational institution, social actors, and learning processes. This translates into an approach to adult learning where educational activity is treated as a necessity. Learning is not embedded in the broader context of the interviewees’ life. Patterns from compulsory education, in terms of the relationship with the teacher/trainer and the institution, and participation limited to fulfilling the basic requirements – attendance and passing, are reproduced in adult learning. The choice of opportunities and dispositions to undertake activities are limited. The question of the quality of the educational process, which was not investigated, also needs further exploration. It is particularly worth looking at vulnerable groups, who do not feel comfortable in their contacts with institutions, making critical judgements

or exercising their rights. In the case of one of our interviewees who took a course that should provide instruction on the operation of cleaning machines used in large facilities, the trainees were unable to gain practical experience due to the lack of available machines – only one vacuum cleaner was available.

Adult learning in this case is not a pathway, an opportunity to break patterns and limitations, it is part of a trajectory of reproduction. It does not open a new structure of possibilities to make a real impact on the situation of the participants; learning does not lead to empowerment.

5.2. Cumulative advantage pattern

School and learning are mostly associated with positive memories, especially from primary school, when a kind of base was formed – an attitude towards learning and school, the perception of oneself as a student with certain competencies, able to cope with the reality of school. Even when some occasional setbacks occur (usually in secondary school), they are overcome and resources are mobilised to develop coping strategies. These include the support of the social environment, the social capital and educational competencies embedded in the family of origin, but also one's resources to make up for certain shortcomings and plan remedial actions, and support from peers. In facing difficulties, due to an active attitude to overcome them, the interviewees build and perpetuate a sense of self-efficacy. That prevents creating a negative image of the school and learning or a breakdown of confidence in one's competencies. A characteristic feature of the educational environment of this group is the autonomy, the trust of their parents, and their subsequent consent to make choices and independent decisions in the educational area, regarding for example their further educational path or extracurricular activities. In adulthood, they are conscious, critical and reflective users of the educational process and have a high level of subjectivity – they do not carry over traditional patterns of subordination from compulsory education. They are characterised by a high level of commitment to learning resulting from intrinsic motivation. Learning is part of a lifestyle, and the knowledge and skills acquired are seen as beneficial and as a resource for solving both specific personal and professional problems. Furthermore, learning is a rewarding activity that fits in with building one's self-image.

This is a pattern that fits into the trajectory of cumulative advantage – the respondents come from families with relatively high (not low) cultural capital and each of them has at least a secondary education. They are usually active and involved in the selection and evaluation of educational offers. It should be underlined that the educational offers for them are more diverse and of higher quality. They use their accumulated capital (social, economic, intellectual) to select different options that meet their expectations and bring specific results, e.g., strengthening their professional position or increasing their economic competitiveness.

5.3. A miracle of the school system's case

It is worth highlighting one of the narratives – a female with a background of low cultural capital, whose life path, however, escapes the classic patterns of cultural reproduction. We can consider her case as an initial double disadvantage, due to her background – parents with a low position in terms of education, job and material status, and a territorial disadvantage. Living in a rural area limited her opportunities for development at an early stage of school and constituted a barrier to accessing educational services, extra-curricular activities and opportunities to develop her interests. However, due to her initial personal dispositions and exceptional cognitive abilities, she experienced many educational successes at school. She tried to be highly active as a student and engaged in various non-compulsory activities (as much as possible, as she was excluded due to the lack of available transportation). In the family home, due to her parents' professional situation, she had responsibilities beyond those which are standard for a teenager, including having to look after her siblings. At the same time, her parents were very trustful and guaranteed a high level of autonomy and built self-reliance. They believed that learning is a pathway to life change (a good professional and personal life). However, the respondent recalls this autonomy as overwhelming.

No, I always had a lot of autonomy as far as my parents were concerned because my parents, in order to provide for all the children, had to work and very often I was left with my siblings. My brother used to call me mum because my parents weren't there very often, so it's so hard for me to say, but I was at home and I acted like a parent. My siblings and I were responsible for making sure the household chores and lessons were done, etc. (IDI_4)

In this particular case she got the opportunity to break the modal (typical) trajectory, (Bourdieu 2014) she was granted a scholarship and the possibility to continue her education in Warsaw. In adulthood, she treats learning as an effective way to change her life situation, solve personal problems and develop her professional career. She is a highly reflective and committed participant who also makes critical evaluations of the educational offer and has clear goals and expectations.

5.4. Limited advantage pattern

The attitude towards adult learning developed differently among people whose experience of compulsory education was good, but whose self-efficacy and influence on the strategies taken in the face of setbacks was limited. The interviewees had a good start in primary school, their parents expected them to have good grades and focused their attention on this aspect. In the face of unsatisfactory results, they responded and took the initiative. Even though we can point to the vastly different nature of the undertaken actions, from overprotectiveness to repressiveness, interestingly the consequences for their offspring were similar. In the interventions

of the parents, there was no place for including their children's voices and letting them choose coping strategies. The child had to accept the imposed solutions, and subsequently the limitation of their sense of subjectivity and self-efficacy.

Those interviewees do not feel confident in the process of institutionalised learning and take it up only in specific circumstances, rather because of particular, professional needs. They do not pay much attention to the selection of the educational offer and take one that is most accessible. The traditional teacher-student relationship is accepted and they are neither reflexive nor critical towards the undertaken activity, taking things as it goes. At the same time, they value the role of knowledge in their professional and personal lives, although in a more pragmatic dimension than in the group mentioned above.

5.5. Outliers

It is also interesting to look at situations that differ from the outlined patterns. The reverse of the "*miracle of the school-system case*" mentioned earlier is one of the interviewees who also experienced social and territorial disadvantage during her childhood and adolescence. However, these stories differ in their initial individual dispositions, in the opportunities afforded to them by educational advancement and in the way they participated in learning activities in adulthood. In both cases, we can also notice the differences in parenting and the level of autonomy guaranteed by their parents. The period in which the respondents' attended compulsory education is also a key – the 1990s in the first case, and from the mid-1970s and 1980s in the second one.

The educational effort the interviewee made was often inadequate to the expectations of the school system. It was usually difficult for her to prioritise what to focus on and how to learn. During compulsory education she was easily discouraged, after one minor setback she lacked the motivation to try again. She refers to her learning as "taking the easy way out." Her parents did not have educational aspirations for her and her siblings, they rather expected her to follow their life path. This attitude was, in her case, a barrier to shaping her educational trajectory according to her interests.

Regardless of familial habitus, she internalised the notion that education is an opportunity for social mobility and a better life. This biography however exemplifies an exceedingly long road to achieving educational advancement. The school system did not guarantee her support but rather tried to force her into a modal trajectory in line with her social background. She recalled an experience from the end of primary school when her class teacher chose each pupil's future educational direction. In her case it was suggested that she should continue her education at a vocational tailoring school.

Her path to higher education – non-linear and requiring input of effort – has not translated however into benefits in terms of social status or the stabilisation of her

economic and professional situation. Despite this, the interviewee is continuing her attempts at educational activities in adulthood, believing that learning will open up new prospects for her in the labour market and personal life. It seems that adult learning is undertaken as a certain escape strategy or an attempt to change her life, but with no faith that this will translate into professional change.

In her case, learning activities seem to give her a peaceful feeling that she did not rest on her laurels, rather than facilitate the creation of a particular plan for the future. One of the problems seems to be the lack of initial dispositions which allow her to efficiently convert achieved knowledge and skills gained through learning into a higher professional position. The respondent shares her fears and uncertainty about whether she will ever be able to find a job in the field she decided to train for, but she keeps continuing her course, even though each additional month comes at a cost.

Another example of an outlier is, already mentioned, an interviewee coming from a high cultural capital family, who experienced an accumulation of failure during compulsory education. The respondent's recollected primary and secondary school experiences correspond to the characteristics of school phobia, which led him to an extreme dislike of school feeding practices and educational institutions themselves.

He is very reflective, he recalls the period of compulsory education in his life as ineffective and is highly critical of the educational system. Nevertheless, in adulthood, he actively searches for ways to acquire knowledge and competencies that are relevant to his needs and professional field. He consciously chooses educational offers and is ready to invest resources in them. He has internalised the values associated with acquiring and having knowledge. He has numerous educational activities planned, including those outside his professional field – he talks about the courses of his “dreams”. Adult learning gives him satisfaction, and he emphasises that teaching methods other than those he used to know from school allow him to break down barriers and build confidence in his competencies.

6. Discussion

Nowadays, the three-phase model of life – preparing for life, being actively engaged in life, and the period of retirement – has lost its relevance. The importance of upgrading knowledge and skills throughout life to keep up with changes is beyond question, and the impact on the well-being of an individual is well-documented in the literature (Alheit 2011: 10). However, the impact of formal education on the life course is still significant, shaping opportunity in the labour market to a great extent. Education shapes the typical structures of the life course and exerts a decisive influence on people's plans and experiences in life. Inequalities in education (compulsory, higher and adult) are still a big topic in social research

and social policy. As Desjardin et al. (2006) point out, almost no country is truly able to reduce social inequalities through adult learning. The disproportion between the share of high and low educated in terms of accessing adult education is part of broader patterns of social inequality (Ioannidou, Desjardins 2020; Schoon, Melis 2020). In the area of adult learning it can be interpreted in the context of the Matthew effect. People coming from families with higher status have a higher level of education, occupy higher professional positions and are more educationally active, which, in turn, strengthens their privileged position. Analysis in the area of social indicators and quantitative studies are based on the level of participation and show the structural determinants of access to adult education. The analysis presented in the article shows, however, that the very fact of participation is only part of a bigger picture: inequalities run much deeper. The quality of the educational offer, the benefits, and the way of participation are diversified and contribute to the petrification of social distances. As Beoren (2017: 165) states:

While adult lifelong learning can be seen as a means to climb the social ladder and to advance one's life chances [the author is referring to social mobility discussions], reality demonstrates [that] this idea has failed. Lifelong learning participation mainly serves those who can use it to stack up cumulative advantages and not the ones who can use it to compensate for missed life chances.

Dispositions and approaches acquired during earlier stages of life, in different contexts – such as the family of origin and formal education – determine the benefits one can get from learning in adulthood. The attitudes, motivation and self-confidence of adults taking part in education are rooted in their past experiences. The way one can get along in the educational field, as well as complex situations and factors inherent in the family of origin, are important, such as: particular patterns, attitudes from the family home, parenting styles and, especially, the level of autonomy. Reconstruction of educational paths and experiences, especially of school failures and ways of coping with them, lets us identify particular patterns connecting compulsory and adult education. The most distinctive are: cumulative disadvantage and cumulative advantage (Kilpi-Jakonen et al. 2015).

With the former, the disadvantage starts already in primary school. Underachievement and various aspects of exclusion in the educational field, accompanied by lack of support from parents or teachers, and failure with no experiences of overcoming it, lead to alienation and distancing from the process of learning and educational institutions. This attitude continues into adulthood, despite the attempts to participate in different forms of training. Representatives of these patterns have a sense of inferiority in their relationship with instructors and tend to engage in educational activities out of necessity. The educational activity is seen as being imposed and decision-making and agency are limited. Adult learning has the potential for emancipation, social development, professional development, etc. However, participants who had negative experiences from the period of formal

education, who had experienced an accumulation of failures and the absence of support, do not perceive learning as one of the ways to solve problems. The offer that is available for them is low quality and their participation in learning does not translate into significant changes in their life, neither in their well-being nor in the professional area.

The pattern of cumulative advantage relates to positive experiences from compulsory education and active and fruitful participation in adult education. The most active and confident users of educational activities in adulthood had much more positive experiences from primary school and secondary school, even though they faced some failures, at the same time, they had resources and possibilities to cope with them. The support of parents, as well as the autonomy granted to children should be underlined. As adult learners they are reflective, active agents of the educational activities, starting from selection, through the entire process, until taking advantage in terms of professional and personal development.

However, it was also possible to identify patterns that go beyond these schemas. It seems that certain parental styles intervene in creating an approach to learning, especially in terms of agency. The analysis shows that the level of autonomy that parents granted their children when they experienced school problems and failures is of particular importance. Interviewees who did not experience the freedom to make educational decisions, to cope with school problems, are uncertain and passive in their relationship with institutionalised learning in adulthood. Learning is undertaken point-by-point, and they are also less critical and reflexive.

The significance of a rural background for an individual's educational trajectory appears to be an important issue. In our three cases, we observed that living in rural areas limited the respondents' access to diverse opportunities for developing their interests during childhood. However, further exploration is needed to analyse the combined influence of place and time on adult education.

Educational patterns play a significant role not only during childhood and adolescence but also have an impact on learning in adulthood. The way of participating in education later in life and its benefits are determined by former experiences, so adult education cannot be treated as the universal remedy that equally supports every social group. It constitutes an educational field resembling to some extent the field of compulsory education, where individuals/groups having particular dispositions, competencies and resources navigate better or worse. Adult learning can be a tool for empowerment also for vulnerable groups, but the process of learning usually requires using different methods and mechanisms and should be adequately supported. Few empowerment mechanisms emerged in literature: "empowerment through participation as a self-value, empowerment through the reconstruction of past experiences, empowerment through the strengthening of their social capital and empowerment through literacy skill" (Papaiouannou, Gravani 2018: 1), which can be implemented. Initial dispositions and attitudes towards learning should be considered while creating solutions and mechanisms

supporting adult education. The concept of transformative learning, where through critical reflection, one can come to identify, assess, and possibly, reformulate key assumptions on which one's perspective is constructed, is one of the approaches to be considered (Kloubert 2020; Christie et al. 2015).

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