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Monographs of rural communities: Polish school of research

Abstract

This article presents the most important dilemmas related to the monographic method, discussing them on the example of monographs of Polish villages. Particular emphasis is put on contentious issues such as: research statics – dynamics, representativeness – generalisations, and enumerative induction – analytic induction. The analysis of the selected monographs reveals that most of the objections reported with respect to such publications (i.e. focus on describing rather than analysing the problem, providing unnecessary details, lack of representativeness, and insufficient theoretical reflection) seem to be unfounded. In the end the article discusses circumstances that point to the need to return to this method, particularly in countries peripheral to the centre of the global academic field.

Keywords: monographs of villages, statics – dynamics, representativeness – generalisations, enumerative induction – analytic induction, ‘dirty’ theories, a shift towards materiality.

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Introduction

Until the mid-20th century, Polish sociology was best known in the world for its monographic research. Next to the memoir method it was the hallmark of Polish empirical sociology (Kwaśniewicz 1993). It was not until the 1970s that mass surveys – brought mainly from the United States – replaced both of these approaches. Although often criticised (for their static descriptions, excessive details, lack of focus on one key issue, dubious representativeness, lack of theoretical dimension), these two methods seem to be worth giving them yet another thought. As a result of the efforts of the research centre in Łódź,¹ interest in personal documents has been revived in recent years. Monographs also deserve similar attention, all the more so because social sciences continue to be oriented towards research embedded in local contexts, as pointed out on the example of post-1989 Poland (Starosta 1995). Despite this, a clear revival of the monographic method – often wrongly identified with case studies, which undermines its actual assumptions and well-established research practice (Przybyłowska, Zygmantowski 1995) – has not been observed. Below are presented the most important ideas and achievements of the Polish school of research implemented in rural environments. Also, circumstances are presented that justify the collection of social knowledge by means of the monographic approach.

The discussion on the legacy of Polish monograph-based research tends to be reduced to: (1) monographers' attempts to systematise the given topics (economy, community, culture); (2) methods employed to describe them (static *vs.* dynamic, general *vs.* problem-oriented monographs); (3) naming the disciplines in which specific projects were implemented (historical, economic, ethnographic and sociological monographs). The most comprehensive and therefore most recognised Polish studies in this area include: *Monografie wsi w Polsce. Przegląd problematyki badawczej* [Monographs of villages in Poland. Research review] by Krystyna Adamus (1959), devoted mainly to ethnographic but also to historical, economic, social and sociological research; *Stan współczesnej monografistyki spo-*

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łeczności lokalnych i możliwości badań przemian społecznych [The state of contemporary monographs of local communities and possible research of social transformation] (1971), *Monografie wiejskich społeczności lokalnych w Polsce* [Monographs of local rural communities in Poland] (1975) and *Metodologiczne rozważania o ponownych monografiach wiejskich społeczności lokalnych* [Methodological discussion of repeated monographs of local rural communities] (1976) by Zbigniew Tadeusz Wierzbicki, which focus on problems related to the typology of monographs; and *Socjologiczne monografie wsi w Polsce* [Sociological monographs of villages in Poland], an article by Antoni Komendera (1973), dedicated to monographic research in sociology.

Monographs: Static or dynamic?

These synthetic analyses reveal an extensive and diversified panorama of Polish research. As Jan Szczepański (1950) says, their authors drew inspiration from both international (the school of Le Play) and domestic (traditions of sociography and social vetting) examples, using a variety of approaches. Classic Polish monographs include texts that: (1) describe one village, e.g. *Żmiąca. Wieś powiatu limanowskiego* [Żmiąca, a village in the Limanów District] by Franciszek Bujak (1903); *Matujzy Bołondziszki* by Witold Staniewicz (1923); and texts written in 1933 at the Puławy Institute of Rural Sciences (in Polish: PINGW – Puławski Instytut Naukowy Gospodarstwa Wiejskiego), i.e. *Broniszów, wieś powiatu Ropczyckiego* [Broniszów, a village in the Ropczyce District] by Jerzy Fierich, *Przybyszew, osada w powiecie Grójeckim* [Przybyszew, a settlement in the Grójec District] by Stanisław Rosłaniec, and *Uniż, wieś powiatu Horodeńskiego* [Uniż, a village in the Horodenka District] by Władysław Przybysławski; (2) compare two or more villages: *Rybna i Kaszów, wsie powiatu Krakowskiego* [Rybna and Kaszów, villages in the Kraków District] by Mieczysław Sowiński (1928), *Góra Bałdrzychowska i Buczyna* [Góra Bałdrzychowska and Buczyna] (1928), and *Trzy Kurzyny, wsie powiatu Niskiego* [Three Kurzynas, villages in the Nisko District] by Franciszek Guściora (1929).

One of the first 'parallel' monographic descriptions of rural areas (the name proposed by Włodzimierz Winclawski for the earliest studies whose methodology had not fully evolved yet) was *Opis topograficzno-historyczny Ziemi Wyszogrodzkiej na teraz w obwodzie płockim położony* [A topographic

and historical description of the Wyszogród Land, currently located in the Płock Region] from 1823 by amateur historian Wincenty Gawarecki (Winclawski 1973). All the aforementioned works followed the assumptions applied in the ‘territorial’ comparative method (Topolski 1968). In most cases this resulted in ‘such research of local communities in which the main purpose and subject matter is to compare a given community with other communities, both from neighbouring areas and located somewhere farther within the same or another region, or to compare the studied subjects with a general population’ (Wierzbicki 1971: 308).

However, the comparative method was used not only in synchronic studies, i.e. those juxtaposing different villages, but also in diachronic ones where the same village was analysed at different points in time. This type of comparative method was labelled ‘chronologic’ by Topolski (Topolski 1968). Bujak was probably the first scholar in Poland, perhaps even in the world, to use this approach when describing his home village of Maszkienice – first in 1901 and then once again 10 years later (Bujak 1901, 1914). In the post-war period, Dyzma Gałaj devoted two monographic studies to his home village of Bocheń in the Łowicz district (Gałaj 1960, 1996). The village of Żmiąca is a unique case – once again probably on the global scale – which can now boast as many as three monographs: one by Bujak, who visited Żmiąca for the first time in 1903, another one by Wierzbicki, who came here 50 years later (Wierzbicki 1963), and then one more by Michał Łuczewski, who conducted his research here after another half a century (Łuczewski 2012).

Zaborów has also been described twice. First by peasant activist and cultural organiser Jędrzej Cierniak, whose account of the history of this village inspired Kazimiera Zawistowicz-Adamska to conduct an extensive research in 1938. The war prevented her from publishing the results; however, her field studies were eventually presented in *Społeczność wiejska* [Rural community]. Written after the war, the book deserves to be called the Polish equivalent of *Tristes Tropiques*, because it contains the author’s very personal account of her stay in the village, along with memories of her emotional contacts with its inhabitants (Zawistowicz-Adamska 1948). Thirty-five years later her work was continued by Maria Wieruszewska. However, rather than use Zawistowicz-Adamska’s post-war publication as a starting point, she founded her research on the – luckily – extant material from the original field studies, particularly questionnaires never used by

her predecessor (Wieruszewska 1978). In 1990, Zaborów became a subject of research once again – this time by Ryszard Kantor, who wrote what could essentially be recognised as the third monograph of this village but focused rather on the Polish diaspora in North America and its relations with the home village and parish of Zaborów (Kantor 1990).

Polish monographers applied different means to make the static image of a given local community more active, other than simply re-visiting the studied area and obtaining new data. They introduced the dimension of time in their work by taking into account not only the contemporary empirical data and field reports but also those available in a variety of historical sources. This tradition was started by Bujak, who in his description of Maszkienice went as far back as the 14th century. Later on it was continued by numerous works published as part of the so-called Kraków historical school represented by Kazimierz Dobrowolski.² Drawing inspiration from the concept of studying the historical background proposed by Ludwik Krzywicki, Dobrowolski called for the use of a method that came to be known as ‘integral method’ due to its interdisciplinary nature. It became the fundament for monographs, such as *Dzieje wsi Niedźwiedzia* [History of the village of Niedźwiedź] by Dobrowolski, in which the author adopted a historical and ethnographic approach (Dobrowolski 1931), and *Wiejska społeczność rzemieślnicza w procesie przemian* [A rural community of craftsmen in the process of transformation], a historical and sociological work by Władysław Kwaśniewicz (1970).

An original approach was also proposed by Wincenty Styś, who in his book *Drogi postępu gospodarczego wsi* [Paths of economic progress in the countryside] presented the history of his home village of Husów, whose reconstruction based on available documents from the past (Styś 1947). A comparison of the research workshop used by Bujak and Styś leads to a number of interesting conclusions that show how monographs can approach the problem of time. This is how Jasiński puts it:

In order to depict its development and changes, Bujak would repeat his study of the same village every now and again. A novelty in the research procedure

² Kazimierz Dobrowolski was an ethnologist, a sociologist and a professor at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, hence the name ‘Kraków historical school’ [editor’s note].

applied by Styś was his unusual propensity for historical-genetic analyses oriented towards economic and sociological issues. He tended to analyse economic and social phenomena and processes over a long period of time, using a broad approach to studying a cause and effect relationship to better capture possible trends and regularities. Therefore, the method used by Styś is compared to the system of filming while Bujak's approach to photographing developmental processes (Jasiński 1986: 229)

Monographs: Excessive details?

Apart from this alleged flaw (presenting a static rather than a dynamic picture of reality), monographs have also been accused of offering too many irrelevant details. They have been said to provide exuberant amounts of unnecessary data (hence often labelled as 'encyclopaedic' or 'inventory') without following an overarching or theoretical concept. One can hardly agree with this opinion knowing how productive the analysis of these seemingly redundant details may be if the method of triangulation is used, that is when one set of data is juxtaposed with other sets of data from other studies. For example, Bujak mentions that from time to time the people of Żmiąca changed the variety of potato they grew in their fields. In late 19th century, they introduced the 'champion' variety which the local people 'polonised' as *szczepiony* [pronounced as *sh-tche-pee-oh-nee*]. Eight years later, writes the author, the entire village planted no other potatoes but the *szczepiony* type. An irrelevant detail? Not at all! In his book Eric Fottorino says that French farmers in the mid-20th century 'needed only nine years to replace the local variety with the American one' (Fottorino 1999: 153). It appears then that Polish peasants somewhere in a remote village managed to introduce this agricultural innovation one year faster than French farmers and they did it some 50 years before!

Data presented by Styś, along with conclusions by other authors, also show how important and useful the supposedly redundant details in classic monographs may be. We owe it only to this scholar's diligence that we now know how many eggs (200) and how many hanks of yarn (1788) were turned over to the Husów estate in 1773, or even how many eggs and hanks were provide by one Jakub Kwolek, Paweł Magoń or Szymon Styś. Naturally, one might dismiss this information as trifle and brush off

the author's meticulous approach as 'humorous joggling with facts' whose collection is to disguise his 'naive belief that something will come out of this simple accumulation of so-called facts' (Szczurkiewicz 1969: 33). And yet it has! It was precisely that level of meticulousness that allowed Styś to estimate the amount of labour that the inhabitants of Husów were required to do for their lord (approximately 15%), which could then be compared to the average extent of serfdom that exceeded 65% in Poland at that time (Kochanowicz 1981). Zooming in on individual farms, Styś discovered that by converting serfdom to rents before 1782, the Husów estate did not only outshine the generosity of Emperor Joseph II himself (who abolished serfdom, or *Leibeigenschaft*, and introduced 'moderate servitude,' or *Untertänigkeit*), but in fact surpassed him in order to actually 'break even'.

It would also be difficult to agree with the criticism that monographs written according to the traditional pattern lacked a clearly defined problem. After all, the aim of the author of *Żmija* was to explain why relatively large farms had prevailed in the studied village, even though all over Galicia the agrarian fragmentation was the largest of Polish lands. In his second description of Maszkienice Bujak aimed to present the consequences of intensive migration. Furthermore, the studies that compared the villages also had a clear intention: to show how villages were influenced by the fact that one of them had a dairy cooperative while the other did not (*Rybna and Kaszów*), or that one opted for land consolidation while the other continued with the system of fragmented land parcels (*Góra Baldrzychowska and Buczyna*). Importantly enough, the comparison and interpretation of available data was only possible with respect to the already studied or at least similar cases. However, with an appropriate research regime it could also be used to show that the impact of the analysed factors could be indicative of a certain pace and stages of development, or possible subsequent stages of transformation within similar systems. Yet such generalisations required a certain level of representativeness.

Monographs: Representativeness

In terms of representativeness one may distinguish three proposals in the Polish approach to monographs. Jerzy Topolski suggested an 'integral

representative monograph' in which the studied village ensured a faithful reflection of the specificity of a given socio-economic region (Topolski 1966). The second, formulated by Bogusław Gałęski, focused on a village that was representative of a certain type of villages, not necessarily located within the same area (Gałęski 1962). Zbigniew T. Wierzbicki had yet another understanding of representativeness which he sought to achieve by studying a random selection of villages located every 100 km from each other along two geographical axes (north-south, east-west) drawn across Poland (Wierzbicki 1971).

Monographers applied one set of criteria or other, seeking to deliver on the objectives of their study. For many years the dynamic industrialisation of certain regions attracted research that compared them with processes in more remote areas, located far from highly industrialised centres. The first of said three approaches to representativeness was applied by Eugenia Jagiełło-Łysiowa, who used a combination of the memoir method and comparative monographs of several villages to explore the process of forming a professional awareness in farmers (Jagiełło-Łysiowa 1963), and by Włodzimierz Winclawski in his analysis of various educational environments (Winclawski 1973). In one of his works (about the educational environment in a peripheral village), Winclawski tried to define the type of the studied village based on the typology available in the subject literature. He used it to 'identify the studied social community, i.e. to determine its type and degree of representativeness or, in other words, the modal value of the subject of research'. In his analysis he concluded that 'the degree of the village's representativeness in terms of its historical development decreased from nearly 100% in the pre-industrial period to 29% in the 1960s' (Winclawski 1971: 19 and 24). Sadly, Wierzbicki's unique proposal to carry out a systematic study of villages along the north-south and east-west axes never materialised. On the other hand, a special database was compiled of most frequently studied municipalities (in Polish: *gminy*), with some of them studied more than once, and offered for research purposes by the Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development (IRWiR) of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN) (Rosner 1985). Providing a description of their agrarian structure, level of agricultural production, social and occupational structure of the population and urbanisation degree, it is a collection of 34 *gminy* representing various types of municipalities across Poland.

Monographs: From problem to theory

The objection raised probably most frequently with respect to monographic studies and their dubious representativeness is that the information they provide cannot be generalised and extrapolated for further theoretical analyses. Based on this, monographs have been concluded not to contribute to an intensive but at most an extensive knowledge growth. However, these accusations are a result of either denying or miscomprehending the fundamental element in the concept of the monograph, i.e. recognising a given community as one specific case in a broader class of phenomena or as an excerpt of a more general population (a larger one, more complex or dispersed – in other words, less accessible for research). A monographic study understood in this way constitutes an analysis that uses a ‘real model’ which Piotr Sztompka defines as ‘any community subject to empirical research, not so much to obtain knowledge about it, but rather to indirectly learn more about another community’ (Sztompka 1968: 48). In fact, modern procedures of mass operations on representative samples also have the nature of a model study, as they seek to map, as faithfully as possible (isomorphically), the structural relations specific to the entire population. While communities described in monographic studies provide for real models that are ‘natural’, the samples selected by the researcher constitute also real but ‘artificial’ models.

The vision of possible benefits of monographs inspired Józef Chałasiński, the precursor of the so-called ‘problem monograph,’ according to whom a comprehensive description of a given community was to serve one overarching goal: to present a selected issue recognised as particularly significant on a local scale and, more importantly, beyond it. Chałasiński adopted this approach in his book *Antagonizm polsko-niemiecki w osadzie fabrycznej ‘Kopalnia’* [The Polish-German antagonism in the factory settlement ‘Kopalnia’] from 1935. However, the first monograph of a village that followed this concept was *Wieś małopolska a emigracja amerykańska* [Countryside in Lesser Poland and the emigration to America] from 1938 by Krystyna Duda-Dziewierz. In the introduction to this work Chałasiński wrote:

Only a thorough analysis of emigration through the prism of a local community studied as comprehensively as possible with the use of various methods

and materials can present emigration with its natural relationships in which it occurs. Once applied to a certain number of localities, it is the only analysis that may provide the basis for proposing general conclusions about the role of emigration in the social transformation of rural areas. Moreover, a thorough sociological analysis of even one local community contributes to capturing processes that are common to all of them' (Chałasiński 1938: IX).

This quotation presents an opinion that was crucial to all monographers. No matter how advanced modern societies could be, the aspect of the territorial location of phenomena and their expression did not lose its significance. This meant that 'a large society cannot be studied empirically in any other way than through properly defined representative field units' (Chałasiński 1947: 7). To deny this assumption is to identify what a monograph seeks to explore (the subject of the study) with what it actually studies (studied subjects – a practice typical of case studies), which prevents the generalisation of results, and consequently, questions the theoretical value of such monograph, essentially undermining its status as a valid scientific way of studying reality.

Eighty years later, Duda-Dziewierz's book confirms that the assumptions made in the problem monograph, the aim of which was not only to describe a specific issue against its more or less general background but to translate the empirical observations of certain relationships into a theoretical inference, were essentially correct. That was the intention of this author whose analysis reveals an environmental focus, showing the interdependence between the studied social processes and the spatial conditions. Her main hypothesis was to prove that the type and scale of the migration depended on migrants' social situation which in turn was reflected in the territorial/spatial diversity of the village and its division into what constituted its 'centre' and 'peripheries'. 'The emigration attacked the village starting from its social peripheries, from those parts of the population whose links with the village were more loose, rather than from its long embedded element of peasantry in the rank of free tenants that dominated in the village, both socially and economically,' says Duda-Dziewierz. She adds that these homologous divisions also had an impact on the re-emigration: those from the social and territorial 'centre' were less eager to leave in the first place and they tended to return to their home village twice as often as people from the 'peripheries' (Duda-Dziewierz 1938: 29).

Duda-Dziewierz's work on American emigration carries an undeniable theoretical value, not only because its author managed to positively verify her hypothesis – by confirming the dependence of the analysed phenomenon on the socio-spatial context – but also because it depicted a more general model of Polish migration. Its most important features included: overrepresentation of marginalised population, 'pendular' nature of mobility rather than leaving for good, and a conservative rather than modernising character of migration and its impact on migrants themselves and the local environment. Duda-Dziewierz emphasises that the inhabitants of Babice near Rzeszów did not leave for America to pursue some 'innovative social aspirations' but 'to buy a cow, build a barn, pay off their brother or sister,' with most of them turning to 'the same occupational activities,' while 'those who returned to the countryside came back to agriculture to which they brought no innovations' (Duda-Dziewierz 1938: 85, 86).

These elements are presently recognised as characteristic of the model of migration not from the 'centre' of the global system but from its 'peripheries.' In fact, contemporary Polish research confirms the validity of virtually all observations made by Duda-Dziewierz. Summarising the first decade of Poland's transformation, the book *Ludzie na huśtawce* [People on a swing] by Ewa Jaźwińska and Marek Okólski shows that it was mostly people from the so-called Poland 'B', i.e. the eastern part of Poland that is underinvested, lags behind in terms of development and has higher unemployment rates, that decided to emigrate (Jaźwińska, Okólski 2001). Most of these were incomplete migrations enforced by the wish to maintain one's standard of living and current level of consumption or prevent social degradation. Only a minor percentage of them, if any, proved to be a factor in improving one's status or driving local development. As Jaźwińska and Okólski point out: 'Mobility is mainly a factor that consolidates stagnation. No innovations are transferred from the host society to the sending one,' and 'international mobility is increasingly contributing to the inhibition of economic transformation rather than being its catalyst' (Jaźwińska, Okólski 2001: 131, 327).

Monographs: Enumerative induction and analytic induction

Speaking of representativeness, it is sometimes said that as sets of detailed but separate studies monographs are ‘unsummable’ and as such do not constitute a larger whole. This objection is raised not so much with respect to research projects following the principles of analytic induction, which may be based on only one but a thoroughly analysed case, but to those which comply with the requirements of enumerative induction and as such aim to describe as many cases as possible in the hope that their sufficient accumulation will allow to formulate conclusions about reality in general. This was, for example, Bujak’s approach, who intended to compile a series of monographs of villages

...selected according to a well-thought-out plan that spanned the entire country, taking into account all economic, cultural and national shades of the rural population, and the physiographic ones of the country. Fifty or sixty such monographs, all written in the period of two-three years at most, according to one plan, with the final compilation of results, would provide an excellent fundament for an action programme for the country and society, at least for the duration of one human life (Bujak 1908: 324).

To accuse monographs of being ‘unsummable’ is difficult to accept; it is enough to recall the already mentioned method of triangulation which consists in compiling the respective data from various studies. Its more advanced forms may also be found in the history of Polish monographs, e.g. studies on rural unemployment. Polish sociology can boast two significant publications dedicated to this subject – both of them refer to earlier monographs to extrapolate the regularities pointed out in them or use the method of multiplied monograph (or case studies) to examine the chosen environment.

The first approach was adopted by Józef Poniatowski in his *Przeludnienie wsi i rolnictwa* [Overpopulation in the countryside and agriculture] published in 1935. Using the so-called normative method, he estimated the most optimal population size for Poland at that time at below 30 active farmers per 100 conversion hectares. This automatically determined the scale of overpopulation at a total of 8,800,000 ‘redundant’ people (those fit

for work and their families) – a truly staggering number that shocked the Polish society. These figures would not have been reliable, or even possible to arrive at, if Poniatowski had not based his estimates on meticulous and painstaking calculations carried out by such authors as Jan Sowiński, Antoni Curzytek, Wincenty Gortat or Błażej Stolarski. For example, with the data provided by Stolarski the level of labour demand per 1 ha was estimated at 0.40 of an adult's potential, while monograph such as *Góra Bałdrzychowska and Byczyna* reported that there were 1.29 inhabitants per 1 ha of total land area, whereby the elderly and children accounted for 0.52, and people fit for work for 0.77. Next, these figures were adopted as average numbers for the entire country. Poniatowski argues: 'By subtracting 0.40 from 0.77, we receive an average excess of 0.37 active farmer per 1 ha for small farms. Multiplying this result by 13,797,238, which is the number of hectares of farms smaller than 20 ha, we receive a total of 5,104,978 adults fit for work but unemployed' (Poniatowski 1935: 25).

Another case may be found in *Bezrobocie wśród chłopów* [Unemployment among peasants], a work by three authors: Ludwik Landau, Jerzy Pański and Edward Strzelecki, published in 1939 by the Institute of Social Economy (in Polish: IGS – *Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego*). It presents the results of highly detailed analyses carried out in 53 villages across the then Second Republic of Poland. The number of those declared as 'completely redundant' by farm owners was estimated at 2,400,000. Another method was used in parallel to ensure a more accurate diagnosis. Based on the material collected by the – truly invaluable – PINGW, an attempt was made to determine the number of 'redundant fractions' or 'leftovers' (in Polish: *zbędni ułomkowi*), as Ludwik Krzywicki called them in the introduction to the study (Landau, Pański, Strzelecki 1939). The existing labour force could then be juxtaposed with the capacity for its use on peasant farms. The resulting number of 'redundant fractions' was nearly twice as high as the former number, which corresponded approximately to the size of overpopulation calculated by Poniatowski.

The question about representativeness in monographs seems therefore to touch upon two – commonly confused and previously only signalled – issues that should now be clearly differentiated from each other. Firstly, there is the question of the legitimacy of generalising conclusions (based on a study of as many individuals/samples as possible) and extrapolating them to the general population. Secondly, there is the problem of formu-

lating theoretical generalisations (by following the principles of analytic induction). While the former results in reformulating one's findings about the studied population into more general conclusions important for other communities of this type, the latter needs to define the conditions under which one is allowed to proceed from individual findings, which point to empirically confirmed relationships between certain phenomena, to making general claims about these relationships and calling them permanent and indispensable (Turowski 1977).

Generalisations to a larger population (representativeness in the strict sense of the word) are possible with the use of enumerative induction, while generalisations based on defining the theoretical relationship requires analytical induction (Znaniński 2008), in which forming a hypothesis is the key element. According to Jan Turowski, who analysed the post-war studies of Polish researchers, 'all scientifically significant and valuable monographic studies comply with the requirement to formulate a general explanatory hypothesis' (Turowski 1977: 116). For example, in her study of the rural family Danuta Markowska proposed that a historically defined type of a local rural community corresponds to a certain type of family structure and the nature of its relationships with family and neighbours (Markowska 1964). The previously discussed work by Duda-Dziewierz is undoubtedly a pre-war example of such theoretical generalisation based on the assumptions and confirming the previously formulated hypothesis.

Żmija by Wierzbicki: How is it made?

While Polish authors certainly did not lack theoretical ambitions, they focused in their monographs primarily on ensuring that their description of the local community was accurate and insightful. This is how Wierzbicki described his restraint and reserve against perhaps effective, but often idle theorising in the introduction to his *Żmija*:³ 'As little theoretical deliberations as possible, and as many facts as possible' (Wierzbicki, 1963: 9).

³ The author of the article refers here to the publication *Żmija w pół wieku później* [*Żmija* half a century later] (1963) by Zbigniew Tadeusz Wierzbicki, whose life and work was presented in Issue No. 23/2017 of *Eastern European Countryside* [editor's note].

However, this does not mean that significant theoretical conclusions could not be drawn from the facts he collected for his analysis. Interestingly enough, rather than stated explicitly they are merely implied by the structure of the text. Therefore, the type of narrative adopted throughout his monograph deserves a brief discussion.

Regardless of his research credo, cited above, Wierzbicki formulated two basic principles: 'the principle of general confrontation' and 'the principle of two-way verification'. They set the rules for handling the collected material which was both abundant and varied. As the starting point the author naturally turned to Bujak's earlier study, while also using other available scientific studies, official data, statistics, individual and focus group interviews, farmers' stories written down upon his request, letters, biographies, surveys, field notes, as well as participant and controlled observations. It was an interesting methodological procedure to employ such an abundance and variety of sources – in a way it provided for an enhanced (multiplied) image of the analysed reality. In addition, Wierzbicki did not 'go easy' on his respondents, questioning each one of them multiple times with the use of various research tools, which in turn gave the effect of multiplied voices despite a small study population. According to said principles the collected material was to be confronted with the 'actual reality' and the 'respondents' opinions'. Both strategies resulted in a characteristic – threefold – order of the text of *Żmija*. Firstly, one can distinguish the *structure of the text* (elements used by the author to build his narrative); secondly, there is the *ontology of social being* that emerges from these elements, although never explicitly stated; and thirdly, Wierzbicki practises his own *epistemologies*, here understood as rules of interpreting data and drawing conclusions.

Wierzbicki reported no major discrepancies between most of the testimonies and responses he managed to compile. The data he presents tend to confirm each other, which indicates that the information contained in the study is credible and faithfully represents the social reality. In turn, the 'objective facts' seem to be 'confirmed and often properly interpreted in the statements of the inhabitants or in the oral tradition of the village' (p. 9), while 'the survey confirms the statements and facts from the biographies' (p. 197). He even quotes particular terms, such as *Góra* (The Top) and *Dół* (The Bottom), *Ogrody* (The Gardens) and *Gościniec* (The Roadside), *budniarka* (a woman from the settlement of Budy) and *dziady* (paupers,

beggars, the dirt-poor), as accurate reflections of the studied reality, because 'the history of these words conceals the history of events and social relations' (p. 218).

This 'double' verification of all available documents enables and proves their dual compliance, as indicated by the author at the beginning of the book. However, his 'circulating reference' is a completely different phenomenon from what Bruno Latour understands under this term. While in the latter's book entitled *Pandora's Hope* (Latour 2013) the meaning of an object is derived from the multitude of relations in which it is entangled, in Wierzbicki's *Żmiąca* every fact has its sense which is then faithfully reflected in a variety of other facts and phenomena (in the respondents' behaviour and opinions, in documents, in material objects).

All these individual facts (with each containing some truth about the corresponding piece of social reality) are just a part of the non-monistic but much more complex ontology of social being, because behind these specific and one-off phenomena hidden are much more general but no less real regularities and processes. This was in fact Wierzbicki's intention when he started working on his monograph. His aim was to 'observe this seemingly spontaneous avalanche of events that occurred in *Żmiąca* during the research period in order to establish certain social relationships and regularities, or at least propose a number of probable hypotheses' (p. 369).

Drawing conclusions about deeper relationships based on the available empirical material, Wierzbicki used three types of explanations, employing three different *epistemologies*. The first one was based on the rules of sociological thinking – the researcher's deeply internalised beliefs about the structure of the social world (cases such as lodging a court complaint regarding the theft of rabbits or the increasing number of people reporting their misunderstandings to *milicja* [the equivalent of the police in the times of the People's Republic of Poland] constituted 'from the sociological point of view signs of a progressing disintegration of the traditional group of family and neighbours' – p. 331; the evolution of principles regarding marriage arrangements was 'a sensitive seismograph of changes taking place in the social structure of the group' – p. 222).

The second point of reference for Wierzbicki's search for the best explanation of events occurring in the village was provided by 'humanistic coefficients' of the respondents. To him they constituted as good a source of

interpretation as the conceptual apparatus of sociology itself (for example, to explain the preservation of the habit of eating from a shared bowl the researcher refers to the words of one of his respondents: 'People are not cattle and don't need to be given food separately, because one knows better than to eat the portion of another' – p. 378).

Finally, the third instance which the phenomena observed in the field are related to are regularities recognised as necessary and desirable in the People's Republic of Poland, such as equality and democracy. This highly ideologised epistemology seems to be the most problematic for Wierzbicki, who allows himself to approach it with clear irony or even mockery. For example, when comparing the number of illegitimate children in different periods of time, he points out that while before the First World War this happened only to workers and in the interwar period only two such cases were reported among daughters of major landlords, this trend increased significantly after the Second World War regardless of the woman's social position. In light of that the author ventured the following comment: 'And so goes the process of democratisation also in this sphere, gaining momentum in the People's Republic of Poland' (p. 323).

This three-pronged analysis of *Żmija* discussed the structure of the text, the emerging social ontology and epistemologies used in it. The ample material used in Wierzbicki's work provides for a polyphonic structure where no voice is disqualified, as all of them are equal representations of the social world. The reality studied on the basis of these testimonies turns out to be multidimensional and complex, and we can now learn more about it thanks to this researcher's professional preparation, his trust and respect for the respondents and their opinions. Ideological constructs prove to be useless and deserve to be exposed, which for obvious reasons must be done rather cautiously. All of this prompted Wierzbicki to focus on facts and be very discreet in his 'theorising' – rather than state things directly he does it by employing a certain type of strategies and methods of narration. The textual approach to analysis, as presented here, seems promising, all the more so because it has never been practised with respect to monographs. This might increase our appetite for more, considering the current popularity of research that seeks to understand ethnography and anthropology as 'writing'.

Summary

The discussion on the basic dilemmas associated with monographers' work (description of individual cases *vs.* their comparison; synchronous, territorial *vs.* diachronic, historical comparative studies; excess of unnecessary details *vs.* their 'summability'; inventory-like description *vs.* problem analysis; randomness of the research object *vs.* its representativeness; theoretical ambitions *vs.* lack thereof; and finally, perceiving the monograph as a description of reality or as a text of particular qualities), and the examples illustrating individual issues lead to the conclusion that monographs are definitely much more than just an ambitious 'freestyle' description of random environments, devoid of wider cognitive (the possibility to generalise the results), or more specifically, scientific (the possibility to formulate a theory) ambitions.

A monographic study is essentially a methodologically and theoretically complex undertaking of qualitative nature, which allows the use of many techniques and tools, and operates on a 'real' rather than 'artificial' model. It enables the study of the social reality *in vivo*, on a specific scale and in real conditions, rather than *in vitro* like in the quantitative approach where the relevant features are first isolated and then aggregated into constructs proposed by the researcher. The former assumes a direct (and possibly long-lasting) contact with a given local community, which has a number of clear benefits: an eyewitness observation enables access to a specific reality as determined by its location (the studied place as an 'independent variable'), materiality (spatial features and physical objects as important determinants of human situations and behaviour), and history (to confirm its 'path dependence'). It allows researchers to formulate judgments about the reality (either directly or through an adopted narrative strategy), unlike in surveys where 'the subject of the study is in fact the social awareness whose analytically extracted content becomes the basis for drawing conclusions about the state of social reality' (Kwaśniewicz 1999: 44). With an appropriate research regime, these conclusions may then be generalised to cover other somehow similar cases or to establish – based on the observed empirical relationships among characteristics – abstract regularities of theoretical status. As concepts derived from an actual study rather than adopted *a priori*, they have the quality of 'established theory', i.e. a theory that says

something new about reality instead of merely using it to confirm the already existing theories (Glaser, Strauss 2009).

Naturally, monographic studies can also verify or, better yet, discredit the existing theories, i.e. undermine generally accepted findings by revealing their historical or spatial constraints, and thus show that they are not universally valid. Many interesting examples of that may also be found in Polish monographic studies, e.g. the works by Bogusław Gałęski, who analysed the dissemination of innovation in Polish farming in the 1960s, when – contrary to popular belief and ideological instructions – the Poznań countryside (traditionally perceived as more modern) turned out to be much more resistant to innovations than the underdeveloped rural areas of the Podlasie region in the eastern part of Poland. To make matters worse, the farmers who persisted in keeping the individual form of ownership, considered obsolete and not development-oriented at that time, proved to be far more ready to accept innovations than farmers associated in cooperatives commonly perceived as centres of progress and modernisation. Gałęski identified these (ir)regularities and captured their paradox: ‘In villages and more traditional groups, where the level of agricultural culture is lower, the diffusion process occurs faster than in villages that historically were more developed economically’ (Gałęski 1971: 244).

Another observation questioning the established beliefs regarding the urbanisation of rural areas may be found in *Wieś uprzemysłowiona* [The countryside industrialised] by Anna Olszewska. A minute detail – the fact that the TV set did not stand in a particularly prominent place in the house but was most often placed in the kitchen – prompted the researcher to a deeper reflection on the importance of mass media in the life of rural communities. She argues: ‘Television was assigned a role: to provide entertainment within the framework of the current lifestyle. It had to conform to the already existing lifestyle, without altering it in any visible way’ (Olszewska 1969: 145). Consequently, the reception of TV programmes was very selective – determined by a cultural ‘filter’ specific to the studied rural environment. If the presented content was acceptable and in line with the contemporary system of values, it would evoke a lively response and would be discussed or commented on. Anything too different from the local reality was perceived like something from another world

and therefore had no binding or model-generating power. As a result, the traditional system of values in the studied location was changing very slowly, which denies the universally recognised power of urbanisation.

Nowadays, when the trust in Great Narratives has been lost (and to a certain degree maybe quite rightly so, considering how they threatened to legitimise the unifying, totalitarian regimes), when we have realised the revealing and emancipatory role of 'microhistories', when globalisation turns out to be not so much a unifying whole but rather a multitude of local regimes that can now confront each other ever so frequently in the increasingly dynamic world – all this should prompt us to turn again towards monographs and think what they have to offer today. In this context, it is worth recalling the words of Zdzisław Grzelak, who once said:

It does not seem intellectually unproductive to reduce macroprocesses to the dimensions of one farm, one or several local communities. A sharp verification of principles takes place at the intersection of what is general and individual. This is where the not always audible signals come from about dangerous deviations from assumptions and plans (Grzelak 1994: 9).

The return to writing monographs seems to be nowadays an important challenge and even a necessity also due to the fact that, as Kwaśniewicz argued in 1993, 'the empirical research currently carried out in Poland does not cover all basic areas of social life and it hardly keeps up with the extremely fast pace of all social transformations' (Kwaśniewicz 1993: 158). If his diagnosis is still valid, this long forgotten and neglected, both in academic education and empirical practice, approach to research should be urgently restored. This has already been achieved in the case of memoir method; nevertheless, one should never forget about the significant advantage of the monograph over ego-documents. Unlike memoirs, narrative interviews or letters (not to mention responses collected in mass surveys), the monograph allows direct access to social reality, including its physical dimension, which in the age of a lively interest in materiality is an extremely valuable element (Bachmann-Medick 2012). Meanwhile, all other approaches in which 'the subject of the study is in fact the social awareness whose analytically extracted content becomes the basis for drawing conclusions about the state of social reality' (Kwaśniewicz 1999: 44) take a longer and rather indirect route.

Writing monographs also seems to be an opportunity for sociology from peripheral countries. It allows to avoid succumbing to abstract theories developed at the centre of the academic field (Zarycki 2009) by putting forward competing theories formulated in different parts of the world, independently, and based on one's own experience. Written in a responsible and mature way, monographs would contribute to the democratisation of social sciences which still reveal the characteristic features of 'Occidentosis' (Westoxification) and remain closed to the content from areas other than the privileged Western countries. This idea to break the existing monopoly is promoted by Raewynn Connell, who calls for a proper recognition of 'dirty' theories that represent the 'global South' – entangled in local details, taking into account the role of materiality and context. She believes they are able to prove to sociologists of the 'global North' that their achievements, although claimed to be universal, are in fact nothing more than a metropolitan sociology, essentially merely a form of ethnosociology, which tends to, even if it is completely unjustified, absolutise its own legacy that essentially refers only to a minor excerpt of reality, disregarding all other depictions that in fact capture the vast majority of cases in the modern world (Connell 2018: 220).

Last but not least, a return to monographic research would give sociology, such as the Polish one, a chance to repeat its previous successes by many recognised as pioneering work. After all, one should not forget that Polish monographs of local rural communities were often ahead of the findings of Western science, sometimes by several decades. Etsuo Yoshino calls Bujak's *Żmijęca* 'a pioneering achievement in the field of historical demography', written half a century before the publications by Phillippe Aries (Yoshino 1997: 9). The specific features of migration from the peripheries to the centre were described by Duda-Dziewierz as early as in 1938, and then 'rediscovered' only in the 1980s by representatives of the New Economics of Labour Migration, particularly Oded Stark (Kaczmarczyk 2005). Finally, Zawistowicz-Adamska presented the idea of 'the anthropology of experience' half a century before Kirsten Hastrup, reporting her own experiences, not only emotional but also somatic, from her research work in Zaborów (Kaniowska 2013). All these arguments call for finally taking the classic, seemingly dull and unattractive monograph seriously. This means reading monographic studies carefully and drawing theoretical and methodological conclusions which will provide a basis

for a new research practice that will address the challenges of the modern world and science, while being embedded in the local reality and thus the local tradition of the discipline.

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