ISSN: 0076-1435 DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/lud109.2025.11 Lud, t. 109, 2025

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‘ETHNOGRAPHIC HEARING’. FROM THE METHOD TO THE ISSUE OF MENTAL WELFARE IN THE CONDITIONS OF MIGRANT DETENTION IN POLAND

“Etnograficzne wysłuchanie”. Od metody do kwestii dobrostanu psychicznego w warunkach detencji migrantów w Polsce

Abstract. Guarded Centres for Foreigners (SOdC) in Poland are both multicultural environments and totalitarian detention institutions in which people may suffer from deterioration of their mental welfare (salutogenesis, Antonovsky 1979). My article discusses the situation of the guards, who, when supervising the migrants detained in the SOdCs, mask the negative effects of permanent control of people, using the discourse of ‘competent power’, which justifies the necessity to provide ‘safety and order’, and thus may contribute to the deterioration of not only their own, but mainly the migrants’ mental welfare. In this context, my anthropological research carried out in the SOdC was connected with many cognitive-ethical aporias, mainly concerning the relevance of the use of the classical ethnographic interview. The case I am analysing concerns a discontinuation of this technique for the benefit of the attitude of ‘hearing and accompanying’ the interlocutor (the guard). Apart from the question of the mental welfare of people in detention (the supervisors and the supervised), this situation

arouses significant questions about the construction of ethnographic knowledge: 1/ if the ethnographer resigns from the interview for the benefit of the intuitively understood ‘attitude of care’ towards the interlocutor’s mental welfare, what content will she manage to acquire (and under what conditions)?; 2/ what is the ethnographic significance of this content?; 3/ what competences should the anthropologist have to be able to responsibly adopt this attitude? In answer to the above, I will define ‘ethnographic hearing’ and – not without a doubt – reflect on the possible advantages which it may bring to anthropological research both in the area of psychiatric anthropology and migrant detention.

Key words: psychiatric anthropology; salutogenesis; migrant detention; knowledge construction in ethnographic research.

Streszczenie. Strzeżone Ośrodki dla Cudzoziemców (SOdC) w Polce to środowiska wielokulturowe a zarazem detencyjne instytucje totalitarne, które sprzyjają utracie dobrostanu psychicznego (salutogeneza, Antonovsky 1979) osób w nich przebywających. W moim artykule chciałbym w omówić sytuację wartowników, którzy nadzorując zatrzymanych w SOdC migrantów, maskują negatywne skutki wynikające z permanentnej kontroli ludzi, posługując się dyskursem „kompetentnej siły”, który uzasadnia konieczność zapewnienia „bezpieczeństwa i porządku” i w ten sposób mogą przyczyniać się do pogorszenia dobrostanu psychicznego nie tylko własnego, ale głównie migrantów. W tym kontekście moje badania antropologiczne prowadzone w SOdC wiązały się z wieloma aporiami poznawczo-etycznymi, zwłaszcza dotyczącymi zasadności stosowania klasycznego wywiadu etnograficznego. Przypadek, który przeanalizuję, dotyczy porzucenia tej techniki na rzecz postawy „słuchania i towarzyszenia” rozmówcy (wartownika). Taka sytuacja, poza pytaniem o dobrostan psychiczny ludzi w detencji (nadzorujących i nadzorowanych) rodzi istotne pytania o proces konstruowania wiedzy etnograficznej: 1/ jeśli rezygnuje się z wywiadu na rzecz intuicyjnie pojmowanej „postawy troski” wobec dobrostanu psychicznego rozmówcy, do jakich treści udaje się etnografce dotrzeć (i pod jakimi warunkami); 2/ jaką wagę etnograficzną mają te treści; 3/ jakimi kompetencjami powinien dysponować antropolog, by móc w sposób odpowiedzialny przyjąć

taką postawę? W odpowiedzi określę, jak można rozumieć „etnograficzne wysłuchanie" i – nie bez wątpliwości – zastanowię się nad możliwymi korzyściami, jakie może ono przynieść badaniom antropologicznym, zarówno w obszarze antropologii psychiatrycznej, jak detencji migrantów.

Słowa kluczowe: antropologia psychiatryczna; salutogeneza; detencja migrantów; konstruowanie wiedzy w badaniach etnograficznych.

Foreword

In ethnographic fieldwork, meetings and conversations conducted as a part of participant observation, regardless of their type or methodological classification, have a performative dimension – similarly to that of participation in behaviours. This is tantamount to the ethnographer opening herself to unpredictable situations (serendipity and experiment. Majbroda 2020: 292-297 and further) with their cognitive, psychological and ethical consequences, and thus accepting that they may considerably alter her future attitude to fieldwork. Hence, the researcher: 1/ faces a constant selection of the best strategy of establishing a relation with people, 2/ faces the challenge of accepting the unpredictable consequences of her decisions and actions, and 3/ bears their existential effects (as repeatedly addressed by the autoethnographic and ethical approaches, e.g. Kafar, Kacperska 202: 17-19). I will relate this aspect of ethnographic research to a past case when back in 2018 and 2019 I co-researched immigrant detention, carrying out an ethnographic project in six Guarded Centres for Foreigners (SOdCs) in Poland. Despite the lapse of time, the event I decided to discreetly analyse has failed to escape my memory, provoking two types of questions.

Two questions and their theoretical/methodological connotations

The first question concerns, in general, the process of the (co)creation of ethnographic knowledge: whether the researcher acquires any such knowledge (and if so, what sort of knowledge she acquires) when she not only has to resign from the planned interview scenario, from following the interviewee, but also to abandon the role of the person posing questions (in a variety of ways) and instead take on the role of a listener in view of the traumatic context of the situation? In response, I will refer to the subtle area of the individual psychosocial competences of every individual entering into the process of co-constructing ethnographic knowledge with the Other. Here, I will then focus on the issue of performativity understood as entering into the research process, with the ethnographer’s acceptance of the unpredictable research effect. The second question refers to the context: what does the ethnographer’s resignation from the interview for the benefit of Hearing to her interlocutor say about the environment in which the individual functions? In this thread, I will refer to the functioning of detention as actions having a specific impact (exactly what impact?) on the mental health of both the people detained as ‘illegal immigrants’ and those who supervise them. I situate these reflections within the area of interest of psychiatric (partially psychological) anthropology, and in particular salutogenesis (Antonovsky 1987, 1987, Kirmayer 2015, Przyłęcki 2024). This proposal indicates a significant connection between people’s mental well-being and their sense of coherence. It takes into account people’s dependence on how they perceive themselves in relation to themselves and other people from various social circles who are closer and more distant to them, and how they see themselves and their resourcefulness in life’s continuum. Further on, I will return to this thread more extensively, analysing the case of the sentry guard. Let me specify here that this approach is interested in the conditions enabling (helping) individuals to maintain their health, including their sense of mental well-being in any environment in which they happen to function, including that of migrant detention. In both threads, the axis of reflection is founded on the assumed separateness of the subject from the system of rules (such as the rules of

management at the SOdC) and structures that define it: be they notional (e.g. the understanding of the detention of 'illegal immigrants' and the ideas justifying its existence), linguistic or discursive (e.g. the provision of safety in the face of the dangers associated with illegal immigration). The subject, whether an individual or individuals, escapes the metaphor of a social actor (Goffman 2000).

This metaphor eliminates the complexity of the individual world of the agential subject and reduces it to the expectations of the environment, to which the subject adapts. Although the roles undertaken by 'social actors' illustrate the hierarchy of the power and system structure, they do not accentuate the subject's separateness from the structures on which the subject depends and through which they also express themselves (their roles). Therefore, I am inclined towards the interpretation of critical realism represented by Margaret Archer (1995), who highlights the separateness of the subject's 'internal world' from the 'external social world.' People are immanently agential (agency, Archer 2010: 15-34) and influence the world (rules and norms), which co-creates them in such a way as to be able to solve their existential problems (cares). This manifests itself through the subject's internal conversations (Archer 2003: 1-20, 2010: 1-14), which enable their daily reflectiveness (understood as an ability; Archer 2003: 165-210, 2010:35-54) and activity. In this sense, reflectiveness connects the subject with the structured external world. For this reason, I will avoid using the phrase 'social actors' throughout the text and will speak of people who supervise and of people who are detained in the SOdC. From the methodological point of view, my working assumption is that this individual dimension of the agential subject, who is also socialised, corresponds – as a notion – with one's individual dimension in the concept of salutogenesis, for which it is important to determine how people (as emergent subjects – non-reducible to the system, which partially determines them) cope with the external world in order to be healthy, and how the system (also the emergent one) can promote this. Within this conceptual framework, detention is not the same as the subjects who create it but constitutes a kind of environment co-created by subjects who are non-reducible to its rules (Archer 1995). Detention as an 'administrative

process’. The SOdC system classifies (mobile) people as ‘illegal immigrants’ and detains them. The language of this system defines detention as a type of administrative action aimed at explaining the immigrant’s legal status and highlights Otherness as hostile (to the society). Foreigners are shown as a threat justifying ‘restricting the immigrants’ freedom in modern, democratic times (Niedźwiedzki, Schmidt 2020: 17).

In the research project I participated in, we adopted a broadened definition of detention, which does not resign from the key of perceiving immigrants as a threat, but indicates the fact that it is rather not only an act depriving people of their freedom, but also a system melded into the migration management policy:

> Detention of foreigners will be understood as “the holding of foreign nationals, or non-citizens, for the purposes of realising immigration-related goal. This definition is characterised by three central elements: first, detention represents a deprivation of liberty; second, it takes place in a designated facility in the custody of an immigration official; and third, it is being carried out in the service of an immigration-related goal” (Silverman and Maassa 2021: 679, quoted after: Niedźwiedzki, Schmidt 2020: 18 and 19-25).

In practice, this consists in organised supervision in a closed space, performed against the will of the detained individuals (Niedźwiedzki, Schmidt 2021). This control is possible owing to the large body of staff, including sentry guards. They are the people who directly supervise the detained individuals ‘in the situation of migration’. I took a particular interest in their environment during the aforementioned research and experienced a key situation during a session of interviews with representatives of this group of employees of the SOdCs – which, on the one hand, create a network of detentive facilities, and, on the other, are managed locally.

My proposal to analyse the above issues is therefore a kind of an autoethnographic insight extended post factum, which contains fragments of my field journal, grounded in methodological reflection, but which mainly leads towards a scientific context of further research into the mental health of people in detention. Hence, it also points to certain theoretical

pathways, which I treat as a signpost to future conceptualisation of ethnographic research. In this scope, this text constitutes an autoethnographic confession. It indicates possibilities for moving from ethnographic reflection to the issue of the construction of ethnographic knowledge connected with a specific paradigmatic (such as that of critical realism) and theoretical (the anthropological concept of mental health depending on cultural conditions – in this case, detentive institutions as a form of totalitarian power) approach.

The SOdCs: (Infra)structure of detention

Guarded Centres for Foreigners are specific institutions controlling migrant movement. They are dispersed throughout many European countries and cooperate with each other. They create a specialised network of facilities for the detention of individuals considered by the Border Guard as illegally staying in a given country or in the European Union. Such people can be placed in reception centres for families and women with children or ones for men, and stay there until their identity is determined in the course of the so-called administrative proceedings and an order of deportation to the country of their origin or the one from which they set off before being detained is issued. In a handful of cases, the procedure ends with granting the individual the status of a refugee, allowing their legal stay and privileges enjoyed by citizens of a given country. In Poland, there are six facilities in which migrants are detained on average for a year.

Compulsion

Every SOdC is a locally shaped detention space. Generally, the detained individuals stay in such places against their will, under the constant supervision of guards. Therefore, they find themselves in a compulsory situation with limited liberty and in relative isolation. This is possible owing to an appropriate infrastructure. In Poland, the SOdCs are ‘fitted into’ adapted facilities formerly housing the army: they are fenced, have bars and the interior architecture typical for barracks. Basically, the centres are

marked with a similar structure of their spatial outlay from the point of view of their functions: there are rooms for the staff and for the detained migrants. Depending on the given vision of management of the space, the buildings may even include security passages (bars dividing communication routes) preventing unhindered movement between the particular sectors. The detained may use rooms designed for several individuals, which together with toilets and bathrooms are the only places which are not covered by the monitoring. The system covers the other places: kitchens, medical offices (and the so-called isolation rooms), corridors, dining areas, computer, recreational and teaching facilities, and the outside, including sports grounds.

Isolation

Despite attempts at the modernisation of the SOdCs, efforts to improve the comfort and aesthetics of their interiors, and even replacement of the bars with burglar-proof windows, associations with penitentiary places that are claustrophobic and hostile are justified. This conclusion is important for further reflections if we take into account the impact of the quality of the space in which people stay on their psycho-physical functioning and their sense of coherence, which is conducive to their good health (mainly their mental one). In the case of detention centres, both the detained immigrants and the staff find themselves in the conditions of this relative isolation for a considerable part of their life: migrants for about a year without the possibility to leave the centre, and the supervising staff – sentry guards – for 12 hours a day, 3 or even 4 times a week. This monotonous mode of life is therefore experienced in a place poor in facilities that allow to maintain the sense of physical and mental comfort, while simultaneously associated with many tensions and conflicts, as the ethnographer managed to establish during her observation of this environment. Observation in the SOdC consisted inter alia in the ethnographer’s co-experience of ‘micro-situations’ with people. These are significant events for the parties involved, rooted in their daily life. They disclose interpretations of these events and the accompanying emotional states. Importantly, from the perspective of SOdC employees, these situations 1/ were related to the

contents of their daily routines such as the 'performance of occupational duties', which 'were normal', and 2/ were rarely assessed as 'exceptional'. This repertoire of significant (non)verbal actions, being the focus of the ethnographer's systematic observation, turned out to be epistemically significant for her research even beyond the time frame of the study, as happened in the case crucial for her considerations.

Interview?

Hesitations[1]

'I felt the pressure to conduct interviews in an increasingly insightful manner, following the course of the conversation in such a way that the interviewees might reveal their own point of view on their work in detention and the related effects on their life (…). Almost every interview had to be "prolonged" to allow for the time during which the sentry guards' visible mistrust towards the researchers was gradually replaced with some openness. Different symptoms of violence as an internalised "language of relations" in the system were revealed; the violence forms a framework of the individual interpretation of many interactions with the immigrants. The above makes it hard for me to maintain distance and in some situations I experience difficult dilemmas: am I able to allow the thought that the sentry guards are just as much victims of the system as the immigrants?'

'(…) That day we conducted interviews with many sentry guards from the SOdC. They mainly took place in the so-called recreational square, where immigrants detained for their "illegal" stay in Poland could spend time, if they wanted to. At the first glance, the place seemed bearable: there was lawn, some benches, chess tables, and a sports ground. It was also easy to reach it: the willing individuals could enter the place directly from the SOdC building, from the corridor in which their rooms were located. As such, it was one of the spaces, in which the immigrants met each other. A gym, a common room, a computer room, dining areas and kitchens,

[1] The subchapters „Hesitations" and „The Event" draw substantially on my field notes.

bathrooms, toilets, and finally corridors are points and routes of their daily existence in the centre. Their time at the SOdC, although rationed by the many safety and hygiene rules and regulations, was actually a long series of uncountable moments filled with a kind of inactivity shared with the people supervising the life of “the detained” (…). My first impressions from the square were as follows: “At least this, at least some greenery and fresh air.” This “detention oasis” is a small space surrounded by a high wall with its upper end armed with barbed wire netting. It was inclined towards the little square, ultimately preventing the migrants to force the fencing and escape – an endeavour undertaken from time to time (...).’

The event

‘From the very morning we were talking here to the sentry guards taking an opportunity to “have a smoke” (…). Normally, sentry guards are not willing to consent to being interviewed although they are obliged to do so by their superiors. I was all the more surprised when one of them actually asked me to see him. He was on a 12-hour duty and so, as he explained, “he was able to carry out some of his more important duties already before noon and save time for our meeting”. I agreed, informing him that I would like to take an interview and record it (…), to which he consented.

My attention was drawn to the fact that the sentry guard himself pointed to the small bench standing at the back of this little square, directly by the wall (the place was conducive to having a conversation). When we sat down, I repeated that I wanted to conduct an interview with him and record it. With perceivable hesitation, the sentry guard managed to say: “I don’t want you to record our conversation and conduct an interview.” Then the situation took an unusual turn. There was a slightly awkward silence. I tried to find myself in these circumstances, and the sentry guard began to feel uneasy. His embarrassment rubbed off on me. I saw that something was really bothering him. He was nervously folding his hands on his knees, turning his head away from me and finally lit a cigarette. It was clear that he was very nervous. I decided to start a conversation, asking why he had resigned from the interview to which he had, after

all, consented. Taking this opportunity, I assured him of the confidentiality of our conversation, the ethics of ethnographers' work, and our duty to protect the data acquired in the field, trying to convince him to talk and to calm him down. The sentry guard refused again and there was silence – this time, however, it was him who broke it. He admitted that he was afraid that his superiors would demand the contents of the interviews from me (and my colleagues) and that he did not want to be in trouble. I asked what exactly might threaten him. He whispered that he might lose his job and that his superiors do not want the truth about what this place [the SOdC – A.Ch.] is like to be disclosed. I asked what he meant by this. However, he only shook his head and said nothing. His hands were trembling… – and it crossed my mind that I should let things take their course. Hence, we were both sitting in silence.

My thoughts were turning to a couple of special meetings with the sentry guards, which, although having a different course, left me with a conviction that they were hiding a work-related trauma, but also a sense that I was entering a world of violence, previously unknown to me, which leaves its mark on the psyche of these people. Rather than feeling empathy at the time (or now), I was absorbing the negative emotions in which the carefully worded answers of the sentry guards were rooted. They experienced frustration, anger, disappointment, tiredness, and even aggression. So I was still sitting on the bench with the sentry guard, but time did not drag. I was clearly waiting for something. But for what?

The silence was broken by the sentry guard's voice: "I did not always work here; I have my past and there are things I perhaps should never talk about here, but still I want to tell them to you." When I looked at him, tears were streaming down his face; I thought that the place in which our bench was standing was not an accidental choice – it protected us from prying eyes and fostered this difficult intimacy. The sentry guard was telling me, slowly and not without deep emotions, a story of his life. It was a monologue. Gradually, his complex personality unfolded. He was a loner, of merit also for other uniformed formations, well-versed with mechanisms of psychological manipulation and violence. However, he was broken by life – in particular by a personal loss from which he never

recovered despite attempted assistance. His roughness was therefore consistent with how he perceived the world he was sharing with me. He emanated a kind of helplessness and emptiness (…), which he unsuccessfully covered with the uniform of “an experienced sentry guard from the SOdC and a good colleague.” When he finished, silence fell again. My words were of no particular significance here. We stood up and he only uttered that he felt my understanding.’

Mindfulness – towards ethnographic hearing

Degradation

At the time, I considered that event (and similar ones) as a kind of borderland to my research road in the SOdC. The emotionally difficult situations faced by the people staying at the SOdC convinced me that supervising people specifically has a detrimental effect on the mental health of both the detained individuals and the staff that supervise them. I did succeed in acquiring knowledge which constructed my idea of the context of the sentry guards’ duties, but I found its ethnographic value dubious. Despite the lapse of time, that event was still strongly resonating within me. The ‘dark borderlands’ demanded some light, which ultimately brought me to the question of what exactly, as an ethnographer, I was tackling at the time?

The above-described experience revealed two issues to me. The first concerns the processuality of ethnographic research. On the one hand, it is connected with the autoethnographic approach, and on the other, with performativity. The former serves for an analysis of the experience of the acquisition of knowledge on the Other, and is therefore a method leading to an explanation of the journey undertaken by the researcher to become familiar with the Other’s world. In this sense, the researcher goes further away from the narcissistic threat connected with practicing autoethnography and uses its evocative dimension only to a small degree (BieleckaPrus 2014: 27). In the latter case, her actions remain close to performance understood as a ‘levelling of differences in points of reference

of the scientific observer and the subject under observation.' At the same time, having this in mind, the ethnographer notices an important element of the process, which has not been taken into account in the available definitions of performance in the social sciences. Listening to the sentry guard was connected not so much with the ethnographer's opening to this situation, as with her acceptance of its unpredictability, which does not have to result in the accumulation of ethnographic knowledge on the SOdC. And if so, it is worth asking what the acceptance led to? In other words, what did the resignation from an interview for the benefit of hearing to the individual (and herself) lead to?

Mindfulness

The first issue here is the noticing of the role of mindfulness in an ethnographic situation. In the event in question, the acceptance of the unpredictable was tantamount to activating the 'ability to be mindful and open both to sensations and the events taking place "here and now" (moment-by-moment)" According to the researcher:

> '(…) notions such as "attentiveness", "meditation", "calmness" and "conscious presence" are sometimes used Interchangeably and are defined on the one hand as a specific state (technique), while on the other as a target quality of life (feature), which may result from the subject's individual predisposition or constitute a permanent result of practicing various exercises'. (Góralska, 2019: 112).

Bearing in mind the anthropological interpretation of mindfulness, it is worth pointing out that it is presented in the form of a postulate expressing a protest against ignorance in noticing Others and Otherness in the increasingly technicalised, economically and politically predatory world of corporate styles of functioning (e.g. Tsing 2012) Still, the described experience shows that mindfulness as the practice of being 'here and now' becomes important to both parties of the ethnographic meeting (in this text, I am omitting the complex issues of the possibility to learn mindfulness or the spontaneous activation of one's predisposition to be mindful). In the case of ethnography, mindfulness allowed me to hear the sentry guards'

need to respect his condition, which in turn resulted in his spontaneous revealing of himself, in compliance with his own understanding. This micro-situation with mindfulness turned out to be a meeting of two individuals with a simultaneous maintenance of their awareness of their different positions. Although it stopped the ethnographer’s intention to conduct an interview ‘at all costs’, it made her conscious that research involves above all one’s consent to a process with unpredictable results, which does not have to lead to ‘ethnographic facts’ (observed events co-experienced with Others, while simultaneously undergoing interpretation for research purposes). In turn, owing to the fact that the meeting was continued despite the guard’s refusal to be interviewed, the interlocutor revealed his agency, gaining some advantage over the researcher. He was able to autonomously manage the situation and independently turn towards himself, towards the intimate sphere of his life experience. In this sense, the entire event was a reversed ‘Hearing’.

Defining ethnographic hearing

Normally, Hearing is understood as a detailed interview with a given individual aimed at determining their identity, motivation and circumstances of life. The individual conducting this sort of conversation asks previously prepared questions, complementing the threads which were not included in the interview script on an ad hoc basis. Hence, the interviewee has a very limited influence on the course of this sort of scenario. In contrast, in the case in question, hearing was tantamount first to giving the sentry guard space for his decision on the interview, and then to the researcher’s complete refraining from any verbal interference in the course of his narration. The ethnographer’s non-verbal reactions were only to demonstrate that her interlocutor was being heard. It was however only a minimum stimulation with no certainty on its impact on the sentry guard. The entire meeting may bring to mind some parallels with the technique of biographical interviewing, e.g. the interviewer’s refraining from interfering in the contents of the message or the minimum stimulation aimed at encouraging the individual to continue his story. In this case, the key difference lies in the fact that the sentry guard was not asked to narrate his

whole life as when a biographical interview is arranged. Also, the ethnographer did not record (film) the entire situation for future comprehensive analysis of the verbal and non-verbal contents. The 'ethnographic hearing is therefore a specific type of meeting during which the researcher, 1/ entirely dependent on the individual's decisions, 2/ allows herself to lose an opportunity to acquire information of her interest 3/ in exchange for accompanying the individual in whatever they propose. This kind of experience is not 4/ an exploratory technique. It is above all and ultimately 5/ the researcher's ethical response to a situation the interlocutor finds stressful. At the same time, the researcher's withdrawal would be a justified, autonomous decision respecting the other person's refusal to be interviewed rather than abusing them from the ethical point of view. Nevertheless, this definition of the 'ethnographic hearing' was marked with its own substantive load. It manifested itself post factum, also owing to the researcher's mindfulness – this time in relation to herself (as 'standing by herself'). Therefore, it is here worth recalling the questions: what sort of knowledge can this type of situation lead to, does it have any ethnographic value, and if so, what is it?

The epistemic dimension of the 'ethnographic hearing'

Method?

First, the epistemic dimension of the 'ethnographic hearing' is connected with the knowledge on the methodology of ethnographic research (in a place of detention). The unusual situation of a kind of (spontaneous) conversation took place during research, the course of which depended on many consciously and rigorously applied research procedures involved in ethnographic fieldwork conducted using participant observation, such as a regular observation of events and routines ruling the life at the SOdC, spontaneous conversations with the staff, recording questionnaires and focus interviews, writing observation report notes in field journals and supervising members of the team during its meetings. Because of this sort of regime, the described situation was considered of little ethnographic

importance and was omitted. At the most, it strengthened thinking about the context of life at the SOdC. Several years later, the researcher returned to the situation owing to her somatic memory, which signalled an unresolved trauma related to the exploration of supervision relations at the SOdC. The above coincided with the researcher’s mindfulness training in other areas of her professional activity. Summing up, mindfulness is in this case an ability (which can be developed) to understand oneself first, to be able to better accompany Others:

> (…) classical definitions of mindfulness described it as a state of “mindful presence”, which assumes the subject’s clear awareness of their own internal and external world made up of a constantly, kaleidoscopically changing stream of thoughts, sensations, emotions and behaviours (Gunaratana, 2002; Kapleau, 1965; Rahula, 1959). This state was also often referred to as “bare attention” (cf. Gunaratana, 2002; Rahula, 1959), “pure or lucid attention” (cf. Das and Gastaut, 1955). [Radoń, 2014: 712].

In this sense, the case under study has a significant methodological potential and shows that the development of relations in the field depends not only on the adopted research procedures as a part of participant observation, but also on the fact that their implementation is ruled by the researchers’ self-awareness, which manifests itself in the way they themselves determine their ‘mindfulness’ (and whether they are at all ready for this sort of self-reflection at this stage of their life). Hence, it would be difficult to consider ‘ethnographic hearing’ a method. It involves a considerable risk of a loss of the possibility to access a given individual’s understanding of the social reality the ethnographer is interested in as a part of their research. However, as such – in view of the unpredictability of the situation (reactions of the individual who was supposed to be interviewed) – it can sometimes lead to such knowledge. In this case, it allowed me to work through an anthropologically understood postulate of mindfulness in research not only during the explorations, but also post factum, and thus pose questions concerning the effects of the working and staying in a system of detention.

Sentry guards by chance?

In consequence, and secondly, the situation under analysis revealed an epistemic potential in the area of the understanding of detention relations, which the ethnographer had ignored earlier. Its hasty classification as a 'context of life in the SodC' made her, paradoxically and after due time, conscious of the necessity to recapitulate what one can have in mind when saying this. It turned out that the starting point was the remembered sentry guard's non-verbal reactions as well as threads of the story of his life, which suggested a kind of trauma. In effect, one could risk a question of how his mental condition actually affects himself and his surroundings: his relations with his colleagues and above all his relations with the people detained in the SOdC?

Totalitarian

This is because research in the SodC clearly showed that sentry guards face many challenges. Many of them result from their functioning in a system which should be considered totalitarian. Its basic feature is a universal and multi-level control of behaviour generating mistrust and double behavioural standards. The sentry guards feel that they are subject to permanent control by their superiors, have no autonomy in taking decisions, function in a specific chaos of events and lose confidence. Hence, it is difficult for them to openly discuss at work many of the problems they are contemporaneously suffering. For example, they are overburdened with the weekly and not always well-executed plan of 12-hour duties and the necessity to spend a lot of time in the poorly adapted guardrooms on the floors designated for the detainees. They feel discouraged by the rather low comfort of the staff rooms in which they should be inter alia relaxing to a minimum extent while being on duty, and the poor quality of the equipment monitoring the majority of the spaces used by the immigrants. Additionally, observation of the sentry guards' work revealed their disappointment with the fact that the supervision of the detainees which was entrusted to them requires specific professional social competences which they do not yet feel they mastered despite the offered obligatory training. They usually assessed them as 'insufficient' in this scope. This is because

the supervision practice to which sentry guards must adapt is tantamount to deep intercultural contact, which is difficult even for professionals, including researchers to maintain. People detained in SOdCs are representatives of various nationalities and ethnic and religious groups, and are familiar with their own worlds of customs and traditions, which simply co-create them, just like the sentry guards are co-created by their own cultural identifications and customs. These relation conditions are the only ones in which the sentry guards must fulfil their supervision duties. The detainees have a much worse situation: not only are their biographical and migration-related plans severed, but they are also forced to accept the conditions of supervision while having very limited possibilities of communication – both from the linguistic and cultural point of view. The fact that sentry guards use artificial intelligence for translation does not make them more competent in the understanding of the motivations of the detainees, who are usually aware of the fact that their stay in the SOdC is not only a situation of a permanent control of their actions, but also a necessity of functioning on a daily basis in the reality of the centres, which is alien to them.

Generally speaking, the sentry guards’ attitudes fit the logic of double standards. On the one hand, when talking about their duties at work, they underline the fact that they are in the SOdC to provide safety. They translate this notion – which can be understood in a variety of ways (Stępka 2022) – into declarations of ‘the country being threatened by illegal immigration’ and the ‘legitimacy of controlling the mobility of foreigners.’ Thus, they justify their work in the SOdC, which for them is tantamount to a strictly faultless fulfilment of their duties and observing safety procedures, including reliable reporting in emergency situations. On the other hand, they declare difficulties in communication with the individuals they supervise, blaming them or the foreigners detention system for their own insufficient preparation for the fulfilment of the function of a sentry guard. They often underline that they nevertheless try to ensure that those under their supervision are treated appropriately, which in practice is sometimes tantamount to breaking procedures. However, they avoided discussing with the researchers issues that might undermine the above or

that indicate violent behaviours against the migrants – which were actually witnessed by the observers. An important factor motivating individuals to be employed in the centre in the position of a sentry guard is an attractive promise of an early and relatively well-paid retirement as well as a flexible worktime, which can be used for another payable activity, including running one's own business. The requirements concerning the sentry guards' education do not demand any particularly high competences to work in a multicultural environment in supervision conditions.

Hence, one's employment as a sentry guard in the SOdC turns out to be largely an accidental choice, while the performance of supervision remains an activity leading to practicing double standards. In such realities, the above question of how the mental condition of the serviceman I had heard actually affects him and his surroundings: his relations with his colleagues and above all his relations with the people detained in the SOdC, seems to be justified. This is because maintaining double standards leads to many psychological and mental problems, especially if the system additionally strengthens behaviours involving violence. What emerges at this point is the third epistemological dimension of the ethnographic hearing', i.e. the issue of the mental health of the people undergoing detention and those working in the detention system.

Mental health in the SOdC?

Thirdly, then, the question of the mental health of sentry guards fits findings from the area of psychiatric anthropology, which inter alia deals with the relation between sociocultural norms and people's responses to them depending on their emotional and mental state. The 'ethnographic hearing' thus made it possible for me to turn my attention to this aspect of the functioning of detention. In effect, I posed a question concerning the well-being of the people staying in the SOdC. How, then, do the conditions of detention shape their condition and with what consequences? At this stage of my research, this issue has a hypothetical dimension, requiring further exploration, although as such it can already explain the very fact that the situation of 'ethnographic hearing' did take place.

At this point, my interpretation is founded on the already mentioned concept of Aron Antonofsky of salutogenesis. The scholar believed that the life of healthy individuals extends along the ’continuum between “perfect” health and – “lethal, life-threatening” disease, and the researcher is to identify: a/ reasons behind people’s “moving towards the pole of health” and b/ causal factors “enabling such movement”’ Piotrowicz, Cianciara 2011: 521, 522). In order for individuals to be healthy, they need coherence. It is a state in which three dimensions of our life are significant. The first one is the sense of being understandable. It is related to the manner in which we perceive stimuli from our surroundings. It is better when they are clear, cohesive and ordered than when they seem to be chaotic. With this in mind, sentry guards working directly with migrants have not been given appropriate intercultural training. Instead of being predictably organised, their work becomes permanently chaotic. The second one is the sense of resourcefulness – the way in which we can perceive ourselves: our resources, such as health, resistance, material goods, knowledge, intellect, personality, relations and contacts with others. In this case, the sentry guards function within hierarchical relations based on mutual mistrust and the strong control typical of totalitarian institutions. This limits their ability to develop authentic relations in a place in which they spend a lot of time. Finally, the third and most important aspect of coherence/cohesion is the sense of meaning. It is an attitude involving the perception of life’s challenges as worth the effort. In this case, the sentry guards often have problems with family and intimate relationships and relations at work. Many crises caused by employment at the SOdC lead to a complete breakdown of intimate relationships. Antonofsky underlines that without this element, the other components will not be permanent (Antonofsky, 2005).

Agency

Already at this stage of my reflections, the concept of salutogenesis allows to conclude that the work of sentry guards is a source of their sense of a lack of coherence, which in turn distances them from the health pole – also in terms of their mental health. In this situation, it is easier to understand the motivations of the sentry guard who refused to be

interviewed by the ethnographer. He perceived this kind of conversation 'on the ethnographers' terms' as a kind of control similar to that happening in the SOdC during his routine tasks. Hence, taking over the control, he disclosed his agency, which helped him stand closer to himself when the ethnographer became a silent background in which his dilemmas were reflected. He was able to arrange his narration by himself, ordering it as he pleased, on his own terms and without the need to apply violence towards his listener, who consented to this course of the situation. Revealing his past, he acquired a chance to be mindful towards himself – to be 'now and here', by himself. His life actually involved a sequence of irreparable losses, including a breakdown of intimate relationships, which he inter alia blamed on his work in the SOdC. His personal sense of a loss of control over his own life had resulted in the deterioration of his mental state, which he in turn had to hide at work. Hence, the 'ethnographic hearing' could take place, since it turned out to be a sort of a temporary exit from the totalitarian system, a moment in which the ethnographer in turn decided to stop her research expectations and accompany him, waiting for the unpredictable effects of her decision.

The 'quasi-dialogue' of the ethnographer and the sentry guard provides a pretext for an even deeper reflection on the agency of the subject in relation to areas of their socially-staged entanglement (here: detention conditions). The researcher and the sentry guard, being in different moments of their biographies, crossed paths, meeting one another at a certain moment in the conditions of a totalitarian institution and undertook actions in compliance with their 'internal reflection'. Their individual, but autonomous reflection was redirected to specific actions aimed at one another, simultaneously constituting a specific response to the oppression of the conditions created by the detention system. The agency of the ethnographer consisted in resigning from the methodological approach, and that of the sentry guard's involved his opening of some control-free space for himself.

As much as this interpretation of the example of agency seems to be plausible in the ethnographer's mind, it cannot possibly be confirmed in reference to the case of the sentry guard (and his like in detention). This

is because it is difficult to determine how his reflection, which Archer defines as the ‘internal conversation’, was constructed. The sentry guard’s non-verbal reactions signalling his strong tension, sensed by the ethnographer, were some symptoms of his internal world that were legible to her on the emotional plane.

Summary – towards further questions

Ethnographic Hearing

The ethnographic hearing is a multilevel, performative process of the (co)creation of (auto)ethnographic knowledge. It is not an alternative to the ethnographic interview, which is also rooted in an independent decision of the individuals wishing to talk to each other, but, rather than that, it is a kind of an ethical decision with an unpredictable result, undertaken in the situation of a resignation from the interview.

The ‘ethnographic hearing’ may initially seem to be a loss of an opportunity for an ethnographic interview and, in consequence, for acquiring knowledge on the life of Others. Understood in this way, it is not a research method. It subsequently reveals its ethical and therapeutic potential. The former is related to the researcher’s decision to 1/ leave the decision on the continuation of the conversation (and the meeting) to the person with whom she currently remains in conversation, and 2/ to react with ‘mindfulness’ to further course of events. The above uncovers a therapeutic interdependence of both parties as they obtain a possibility to solve the situation autonomously and applying their agency, in compliance with their perception of the sense of the meeting, which lost its dimension of a direct research intervention.

The moment of decision

The ‘ethnographic hearing’ understood in this way may be used in exceptional exploratory conditions marked by systemic violence, which shakes the sense of coherence and causes the subjects to increase the distance to their ‘poles of health’ – including their mental health. Under such

circumstances, the ‘ethnographic hearing’ comes close to the technique of being with Others in difficult exploratory conditions and seems to be as significant as the acquisition of facts. This is because it turns out to be an ethical way of respecting the autonomy of the emergent human subject. The ‘ethnographic hearing’ consisting in the act of accompanying not only reverses the hierarchy being an element of conducting interviews, when the researcher manages the situation, empathically following the course of narration they stimulate themselves, but also reveals the ease of both parties, which is sometimes much more important from the point of view of a given person’s (‘the subject’s) mental well-being. Here, the hearing is therefore above all a ‘moment of internal decision’ of the two subjects, resulting from their mutual, differently defined mindfulness. In the case of the researcher, the mindfulness resulted from the identification of the rules of detention, which however took place post factum, as a result of a decision to resolve the trauma caused by her research in the SOdC. In this sense, we may talk about the development of individual research competences related to emotional sensitivity to ‘micro-situations’ which make up the ethnographic process of cognition. In the case of the sentry guard, the mindfulness resulted from the nature of his work connected with supervising people (as revealed during the ‘ethnographic hearing’).

From a lucky happenstance to further questions

The moment of decision may provoke a further relation, but only on the condition that a given individual interprets the situation as an invitation to continue the meeting and as a chance to verbalise their ‘internal conversations’. For the researcher, this sort of interaction is simply a lucky happenstance and transforms the moment of ethical and therapeutic decision into a bridge to epistemic reflection. In the case under study, this applies to reflection not only on the processuality, performativity and methodological dimension of ethnographic research, but above all on the issue of mental health in the situation of detention and the system’s systemic and highly destructive impact on people. The salutogenetic approach (and the approach related to critical realism) to which I refer in the text, allows to connect sociocultural rules with their impact on the ‘outside world’ of the emergent subject and their responsiveness towards such rules, in

the context of the sense of mental coherence. As a totalitarian system, detention forcefully reduces different human needs to behaviours which have no sense outside it, in the real world, but as such leave their trace in the form of long-term trauma. Sentry guards, being people transmitting rules of violence in detention, also became the victims of such rules. This therefore forms a pretext to ask about the consequences of the above for individuals covered by their supervision, as the figure of the sentry guard with a lost sense of coherence constitutes a systemic source potentially generating a breakdown of coherence in others – mainly those remaining under supervision in the SOdC.

In this sense, the ‘ethnographic hearing’ is a starting point for questions concerning the mental health of the people detained in the SOdCs, and ways of examining health-related issues in the environment which, on the one hand, is strongly controlled and enforces double behavioural standards in the staff, and, on the other hand, is multicultural, with standards pertaining to health, psyche and emotions defined, declared and practiced in different ways.

Moreover, the notion understood in this way directs attention to a certain aporia concerning the subject’s reflectiveness and agency, as indicated by Archer: how then can internal conversations be examined using methods available to ethnographers? It seems that interviews or ‘ethnographic hearing’ are not an adequate option to draw upon, since the notion of the ‘internal conversation’ itself would need: 1/ to be translated into simple and understandable operational notions accessible to individuals with whom ethnographers enter into research relations, and 2/ a determination of the manner of disclosing the conversations which actually had an impact on the subject’s further existence. Hence, it seems proper to assume that the Archerian ’internal conversations’ remain only a type of ‘assumption’ leading to reflecting on the subject’s emergence in relation to the social structures as a part of which they express themselves.

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