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ABSTRACT
        The "biography of place" can be available in the objective
(currently valid and predominant) history of a given region of residence or
it can be created by individuals in the process of reflections on their own
social identity, which is defined by their place of living. Each perspective
is conditioned by an epistemological and methodological perspective. The
first formulation is characterized by this traditional perspective used in
social sciences: specifically, the structural and functional perspective in
the context of historical analyses. The second approach to the biography of
place is characterized by an interpretive approach. Both perspectives raise
the issue of a "binding agent" linking the world of individuals' life in a
given group, community, or local society. Whether both perspectives can be
combined remains open to debate. It is suggested that they can constitute a
certain point of reference for each other and serve as counterpoints for
mutual descriptions of the "biography of place." The stories of inhabitants
of a small town in western Poland were collected, analyzed, and interpreted.
The town's "biography of place" was told in individual life histories of the
inhabitants in the following dimensions: everyday life; critical events; and
the feeling of sharing "the place" with others. (MN)

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## Adult Learning by 'the Biography of Place'

*life is not as it is, but it is such as it is told about*

(J.Bruner)

1. Two theoretical-methodological perspectives of analysing 'the biography of place'

'The biography of place' can be available in the objective (currently valid and predominant) history of a given region of residence or it can be created by individuals in the process of reflections on their own social identity which is defined by their place of living. These two perspectives of understanding 'the biography of place' are conditioned also by an epistemological and methodological perspective of research on this phenomenon. A traditional perspective, used in social sciences, is characteristic of the first formulation (e.g. structural and functional perspective in the context of historical analyses), yet the second approach to 'the biography of place' is characterised by an interpretative approach (e.g. in the interactionistic, phenomenological or ethnomethodological perspective). Both perspectives pose a question on 'a binding agent' linking the world of individuals' life in a given group, community or a local society which is the main topic of this article. In the scientistic perspective 'the binding agent' is an objectively available territory of a local community and its institutional aspect (the network of diverse interdependent institutions) as well as cultural one (norms, tradition, etc). This approach is characterised by a deep conviction that there exists an external objective 'social order' based on a social exchange of benefits resulting from a mutual 'management' of a community and from performing appropriate social roles and mutual interests. The second, interpretative perspective presents a diverse position as regards 'the binding agent' that links groups and communities. Most positions in this perspective do not question the fact that there exists 'a natural external order', which can be understood or explained by the means of the analysis of processes which give common senses and meanings, social actions or interactions (Turner 1985, Dobrzański 1999). A different option (however rooted in the phenomenological and interactionistic option) is an ethnometodological option of this perspective which refers to investigating and analysing '(ethno)methods' used by individuals and groups, by the means of which people form a conviction about the existence of a social order (Garfinkel 1963). Studies in this perspective focus on social interactions, which constitute the source of forming the feeling of a real world and of reaching a

conviction that there is an external and objective world. They also concentrate on social (interpersonal) techniques and practices which sustain the feeling of social reality and that this world is shared by OTHERS[1].

The interpretative perspective enables investigating social interactions through the history of individuals' life in a concrete place of living and their interpretation of particular aspects of this place as regards both the society, culture and landscape (nature). Using the interpretative and ethnomethodological approach (how people create a feeling of mutual defining a place by narrative interviews with inhabitants and the observation participating in the life of a local community) together with taking into account field ethnographical analyses of a place – mainly ethnographical description, i.e. photographic recording of a place and its interpretation by the research subjects (how people experience, organise, put in order their own closest local environment and its influence on the inhabitants – the analysis of the place landscape) allowed to preliminarily draft a history/biography of a place.[2] Homogeneity of the perspectives of the research on 'the biography of a place' is a very complex matter and probably not possible to be settled here. The reasons for that result not only from the controversy around the very ethnomethodology, but also from the complexity of the very biography.

A significant dispute which lasts between the scientistic and interpretative perspectives is not the subject-matter of this article. However, there remains a question of whether structural and functional analyses of a local community can be clashed with the interpretative and ethnomethodological analysis. In my opinion they investigate different phenomena and different problems, but they can constitute a certain point of reference for each other and be counterproposal (counterpoint) for mutual descriptions of 'the biography of place'.

2. „The biography of place" as an 'objective' history in the educational aspect

„The biography of place" – as a history of place – 'objective', descriptive and factographical knowledge about the place of living of individuals and groups; local structures, authorities and

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Turner 1985 (the option of symbolic interactionism asks a question on how people create common meanings and definitions of life and social order; for interactionists the existence of external world is unquestionable – norms, roles, values, etc.; but for ethnometodologists it does not have any importance.

[2] The research conducted in the ethnomethodological perspective and ethnographic research are not identical to me. The former is rooted in the works of Garfinkel, Wood and others, the latter refers to the tradition of Malinowski and other cultural anthropologists. In the ethnographic version the research on the local society aims to explain and understand by the researcher 'the native point of view' as well as giving the senses and meanings by the inhabitants for the surrounding social order. In the ethnomethodological perspective (ethno)methods applied by individuals for developing, forming and maintaining the feeling/conviction on the existence of a common social order (without specifying whether such exists at all) are sought. Many researchers join or make the perspectives identical or they indicate their continuation.

institutions (description and explanation of phenomena connected with local community in the territorial, institutional or cultural aspect – norms, values, etc.) – performs an educational function mainly of the socialization character. In this aspect regional education or exactly as it is defined by K. Kossak – Główczewski (1994) regionalization of teaching.[3] is most often carried out. This kind of education through 'the biography of place' is carried out both by school institutions but also by non-school ones and local media and it concentrates on the socialization or educational processes in different environments. A similar socialization function is performed by other forms of institutional activity (of authorities and non-government organisations that propagate local values) e.g. organising local holidays or ceremonies that commemorate different events. Regionalization of teaching – as it is said by K. Kossak – Główczewski can be not only the excuse for teachers – adaptation innovators, but it can also become a tool for legitimisation of local authorities and their policy. In many cases education may become, through the dominant 'biography of place', also a tool of hidden violence of authorities towards the inhabitants (Foucault).

Learning through the currently valid and dominant 'biography of place' provides continuity of local community and its history, structures, values and peculiarity of the place. Yet, the dominant histories of 'a place' cannot always function freely – without arising barriers, which concern mainly these places where history has been hidden and falsified. It is particularly visible on these territories which as a result of political decisions have been marked by processes of deportation and migration. The region of Lower Silesia is one of such places, whose official 'biography' was (and probably still is) subject to many ideologically conditioned 'alterations'.

3. „Biography of place" as a process of giving meanings in the educational aspect

By talking about learning through 'the biography of place' I mean learning through such fragment and such aspect of life which I call local identity. Local identity is a part of social identity of an individual and it arises during the contact with others and with the closest local environment. It is the way of self-presentation rooted in a given place and one's own interpretations of the place where an individual lives and its history as well as of significant events. The very process of reflection and telling the history of life is treated in many studies as a process of learning (comp. Bron, West 2000; Bron 2001). This article and presented research focus on such fragments of a story which concern and are constructed by 'the biography of place'. The place is treated as a space that is made aware of and experienced. The most important question is not about 'how places function', but 'what they mean' (Sagan 1995, 147). It is worth to complete the considerations on 'place' with observations of the critical and postmodern trend, which indicate heterogeneity of 'places' appearing as a result of the

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[3]The author distinguishes between teaching regionalization based on the technical and adaptation rationality and

globalisation process and the ideology of consumption or the dominance of popular culture (Melosik 1998). The consequence of these processes is experiencing 'the places' by individuals frequently in an ambivalent way as simultaneous 'closeness and distance' or also as 'neighbourhood and dispersion' (Sagan 1995, s.144). Are these processes the beginning of giving new meanings for 'a place' and (local) identity or do they take away the meaning and sense of constituting (and investigating) the local identity and 'the biography of place'? I think that the processes of dispersion and fragmentation do not so much take away the meaning for individual biographies as they redefine its meaning. In my opinion, such view persuades even more to take a challenge on investigating 'the biography of place' as a crucial fragment of a local identity. It can be said that the basic idea for the presented research is included indirectly in J. Bruner's thought quoted at the beginning which says that local community is not as it is, but it is such as it is told about.

Learning by 'the biography of place' starts already at the moment of making a decision on talking about oneself as an inhabitant of this town. The anchorage of the whole interview from the statement I'm 'from here'..... provided by the researcher and the request to finish this sentence is a crucial moment and it opens a new/different perspective of perceiving oneself by the research subject. It can be said that the researcher as 'a biographical guardian' (Schutz) is at the same time a facilitator/catalyst that facilitates the entrance of the research subject into the process of learning – peculiar educational journey that opens a new/different meaning perspective (Mezirow)[4].

4. 'The biography of place' – in the individuals' history of life (preliminary reflections after the analysis of narrative interviews with the inhabitants of a small town).

The stories of inhabitants of a small town situated in the western Poland have been collected by a group of researchers, then analysed and interpreted. The attempt undertaken by the researchers and interpreters has been made on the basis of the following scenario:

1. the researcher retained the status of 'a stranger' in the community, i.e. not the enemy who belongs to the group of „OTHERS", but the status of someone from the outside, who has the right to 'non-understanding' of obviousnesses and shared meanings silently accepted by the community, which are the basis of the feeling of a community's ontological safety (Bauman, Giddens)

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regional education as based on emancipation-hermenetic rationality

[4] M.Malewski (1998) summing up J. Mezirow's theory of transformative learning writes: that 'we should help adults with transforming their subjective worlds of life and with getting them harmonised with the intersubjective version of social world shared by others' I think that the process of investigating 'the biography of place' can take such form of learning both by the researcher and the research subject – however not in every case of research. It is probably worth posing a question of what it depends on that a given research situation is called educational. Is it enough that 'actors' (researcher and the research subject) of this situation will give it such a meaning? Or is it possible to point at other factors that create the meaning of the research situation as educational?

2. the researcher was choosing the interviewee on the basis of the results of observations of ethnographic character[5]

3. the interview was conducted by one person and it was of a free and narrative character[6]

4. after every interview the researcher wrote down his impressions and reflections[7]


'The biography of place' told in individual life histories of the inhabitants was analysed by me in three basic dimensions

1. everyday life

2. critical events

3. the feeling of sharing 'the place' with others[8]

In this article a detailed analysis of dimensions characteristic of this concrete town shall not be presented. In the further part of the article I shall take the liberty to share my preliminary interpretations and work difficulties connected with this research and interpretation.


The dimension of everyday life of 'the biography of place'

If the category of 'everyday life' was ascribed such qualifications as commonness, routine, 'ordinariness', 'obviousness' and permanence, then at the first 'reading' of the interview it is possible to have an impression that the inhabitants talk only about their own and community's everyday life (comp. Giza 1991). Descriptions of 'everyday life' of a place are very similar in the life histories of the research subjects. First of all, certain commonness (ordinariness, typical character, not distinguishing from other places and communities in Poland) of this local community is emphasised. The same difficulties which are present all over Poland and the same processes, transformations and their consequences, especially in the economical sphere, are indicated. The commonness of particularly disadvantageous consequences of transformations concern not only social phenomena

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[5] The researchers in the first stage observed (keeping photographic records) future 'place' of their research. Two-day stay in the community allowed them to be at home in the meeting places of the inhabitants (formal and informal); in the town layout; in ways of organising the closest environment by the inhabitants (decoration of houses, gardens, etc.); and in placing the most important institutions of social and cultural life, etc. The aim of this stage was to 'make the researchers at home' in the environment, although as regards personal relationships with the inhabitants they remained 'strangers'.

[6] Not in all cases were the postulates of the narrative interview met. It results from the difficulties connected with this social relation and expectations both of respondents demanding further questions (this is what they experienced during different research where they defined themselves as informers transferring data by responding to subsequent questions of a researcher) and also with the researchers' fear of inconvenient silence and excessive feeling of 'an obligation' to ask questions (what often, in an academic education, students are taught as a basic task of a researcher)

[7] this part of the material acquired by the participation in research – extremely interesting and called by students 'The diary of a young researcher' – can also be important cognitively and can be interpreted as a source material e.g. in the aspect of trajectory of research and the researcher or as ethnomethodological studies on real research practice (Garfinkel 1991; Dobrzański 1999)

[8] These aspects of the analysis which organise my way of presenting 'the biography of place' have been distinguished mainly by a continuous process of reading the interviews. It can be said that the dimensions became disclosed and marked in my mind (of an interpreter) in such a sequence. Perhaps – if I return to this material – a different way of its reading and analysing will be disclosed.

(such as e.g. unemployment), but also local authorities. The below statement is an example of dominant descriptions of 'everyday life' of the place:

> .. I think that here there are people like everywhere, there is no difference. Taking into account this province, the fact that they aren't different from people from Wrocław or other such towns where people work, earn money, they are not more – I would say – drunken. Well, these are people – as I say – hard-working. At present they are maltreated with the current situation, as everywhere.....

A very interesting moment – from the viewpoint of everyday life – was the moment of starting a conversation with a person chosen for the research. The research subjects started their story from a sentence given by a researcher with the request to develop it: *I'm the inhabitant of Siechnica......* I thought that in this way it is sufficient to open a space for spinning a story connected with the local identity of individuals and 'the biography of place'. This first question in the narrative interview caused rather an aggressive reaction of a certain kind towards the researcher. Most research subjects did not take up this plot, not to say they aggressively ascertained them – they treated it as something obvious. Utterances of the type: *Yes .. so what?; And what questions do you have? Please, ask them!;* It seems that Garfinkel's 'interruption technique' was applied here in a certain unconscious way, where a researcher (by asking a question) questions something that is obvious and does not require reflections, according to the research subjects, and it is the basis for their feeling of 'social order'. It was much easier for them to start telling their story when the researcher requested them to say something about their first day in the town or simply asked: *since when have you lived in this town?.* The question about facts helped to regain 'the trust' to the researcher. In further parts of the interview the frequency of applying the rule *et cetera* is increased, about which A. Cicourel said that we use it in order not to let the interaction be broken (Turner 1985)[9]. The rule was used both by the research subjects and by the researchers. A. Giddens' thought as a commentary to this situation seems appropriate here:

> In order to live we take for granted questions, which – in the light of philosophical investigations of many centuries – become dust under a sceptical glance. What belongs to them are....the questions of time, space, continuity and identity (Giddens 2001, p. 53)

It seems that for the research subjects everyday experiencing of 'the place' is not something exceptional, specific and deserving others' or their own attention. *It is simply life – nothing special.* However, a conscious or unconscious disturbance of everyday routine in experiencing 'the place' of individuals is defined by them as a threat. Yet, a different value is ascribed by the research subjects to critical events in the biography of place, which are not only 'the interruption of everyday life' - an unusual event, but first of all they are a moment of 'the beginning' or 'the end' of a new/different narration in the biography of place.

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[9] This is applying colloquial expressions (methods) in the interaction of the type: 'you understand' or 'you know' in order not to let the interaction be broken by the other person by saying: 'No, I don't know or 'No, I don't understand' (Turner 1985).

## The dimension of critical events in 'the biography of place'

A critical event in 'the biography of place' mentioned by all the inhabitants is the flood of year 1997. Linearity of experiencing the everyday life becomes disturbed by a critical event. In the official history of the town we come across also other critical events in the past 10 years, e.g. the bestowal of municipal rights or closing the steelworks. However, in the biography of place, the research subjects recall these events more rarely and with minor emotional commitment. A critical event of the flood is the source of a new quality of life in this community. Despite the tragic nature of this situation and many damages the research subjects show in every interview how much has changed 'since the flood'; especially in the town's architecture (pavements, streets, newly planted trees)

> *I have always dreamt of crossing Siechnice dry-shod and on high heels and I have lived to such moment*

The research subjects told about those days of the flood very eagerly and with a big commitment. They were pointed the influence of these events both on the community's life and on their own one. The stories often concerned concrete neighbours and changes in the relationships among neighbours and they were also 'the way' for telling stories about how much they became disappointed and let down. These fragments of interviews can be treated as those which include many elements of a self-therapy character (Giddens 2001) and many quotations in the research subjects' utterances can be pointed at, e.g..:

- reflectiveness in experiencing past events
- corrective interference in the past
- re-defining again the homogeneity of one's own life history – „after the flood"

## The dimension of the feeling of sharing 'the place' with others

Sharing the place with others is this dimension of the biography which in classical research is specified as a community and bond. The question of how people form a conviction about a community and with what techniques they support this conviction was one of the goals of the conducted interpretation. The examined town occupies a little area and has the population of about 4000 inhabitants. However, building the feeling of sharing the place with others is made in a way that can be described as classical, i.e. seeking and defining 'the enemy' in their own community or outside it. The division into WE and THEY is a classical technique of building the autonomy and homogeneity of a group. The research subjects indicate that the bestowal of municipal rights was an event that integrated the inhabitants against a community (a different town), where the examined town administratively belongs. On the other hand, the feeling of sharing the place with others is internally diverse. The research subjects show many borders and divisions that exist in such a small community, which constitute an impulse to build a community.

*Where I live there is so-called old Siechnica. Here there are indigenous inhabitants who either came here after the war or who had to migrate. It seems to me that she is more integrated after all, because these are people who have lived here for years, they know one another; and in the times when it is dangerous not to close the door, I, for example, am not scared not to close the door here*

*It is all divided (local community).There they say that in 'the housing estate' (New Siechnica) there is Manhattan and here it is Bronx (Old Siechnica)*

Local authorities want to integrate the town and they emphasised this using a name of the town Siechnice (plural) (and not Siechnica, which is singular). During the interview with a representative of the City Council the researcher used the name Siechnica, which caused a violent reaction:

*Siechnice!! – ce; - ce!!. Majority says Siechnica, but this not a correct name. Every Pole has inclinations to chat*

Following the course of particular interviews a certain regularity can be noticed in the stories. At the beginning of the interview they claimed that not much can be done in the town – only to live.... Later on they themselves were finding the arguments for not treating the place as only bedroom.[10]

## 5. Conclusion

I am aware that the presented analysis of 'the biography of place' in individuals' histories of life is fragmentary. The research material provides a great number of information, which has not been included here, e.g. stories of people, indicated by the inhabitants, whose role is significant in the community. Their views have even a different meaning for defining the biography of place and particularly the process of learning through the biography of community.

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[10] Feeling of family and community between the inhabitants can be also noticed by poring over church announcements or the municipal notice-board, e.g. *I encourage parents to purchase catholic magazines instead of crisps and lollipops which make the teeth fall out*

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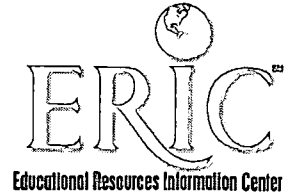
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