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Poverty: Polish young people's concerns about their social future

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Abstract

The transformations of the 21st century encourage a modern understanding of citizenship – not only the in relation to the state approach but also in relation to an active practice. Changes (e.g. minority rights, movement of people, global economy) cause different social problems (social stratification, exclusion, discrimination, xenophobia etc.). Active citizenship requires dealing with current social problems that may occur alongside changes happening in the modern world. In this paper we present how young people in Poland understand poverty and if they are optimistic about it in the future. Results of a survey and focus groups with young people show that young people's understanding of poverty is complex. Younger pupils identify it more often as an absolute poverty, while older as subjective and relative category related to readiness to regular life. Older students perceive poverty as a reason of social exclusion. The causes of poverty, independent of students' age, are related to personal rather than external factors. In students' opinion education and hard work create chances to avoid poverty. Optimism about poverty in the future decreases with age. The crucial transition point in this understanding of poverty and its' reasons, as well as optimism in relation to this, occurs between 11 and 14 years.

Introduction

Young people's attitudes towards social issues – their understanding, perceptions, and eagerness to face them – are important factors shaping the modern citizenship. In this paper we will present young Poles perceptions of poverty: how they understand it, where they see its causes and what is the level of optimism towards poverty in the future.

Poverty is one of the most serious and oldest problems of the world. According to FAO, currently, almost 900 million people in the world suffer hunger (around 15% of the entire population). This prevents them from enjoying fundamental human rights – the right to get food and thus – the right to live. We are dealing with a situation, where a vast number of young people enter adult life, and 200 million of them live off under 1 USD per day, 130 million is illiterate and 10 million has AIDS (UN-DESA, 2009).

Although Europe is one of the richest regions of the world, the European Union has announced 2010 the year of poverty and exclusion. The cause of such announcement were social issues stemming from poverty. Not surprisingly, in terms of objective income, most of the poor citizens of European Union live in the new member countries, but their number in the old member countries is also high. In reference to average income in a country, the number of people below poverty threshold in Poland (20%), Spain (20%) and the United Kingdom (18%) (according to the Social Protection and

Social Inclusion in Europe 2008 report) are similar, but in all countries the number of poor children is greater than the number of poor adults by about 4-5%. It is worth noting, however, that the 'European poverty' is relative and it is not connected to mere survival, like in African countries. It is connected to the lack of access to goods (not only material), which most of the society possesses. Its consequences are mostly psychological – they are connected to a sense of inferiority and exclusion.

Research results on young people perception of poverty, presented in this paper, have been gathered during two years of quantitative and qualitative research (2008-2009). 2430 people from four European countries took part in the study – Poland (637), Turkey (487), Spain (649) and UK (657). Three age groups have been taken into consideration: 10/11 (865), 13/14 (886) and 17/18 year olds (679).

Quantitative data comes from whole classes of students in different locations – city and town. Closed questions about optimism were asked in reference to poverty in the local and global perspectives. The questions allowed us to determine the level of young people's optimism towards this issue – functional optimism (local perspective) and essential optimism (global perspective). The two types of optimism are connected to different mechanisms regulating the attitudes towards social reality. Functional optimism is related to the perceived influence over the course of events, while essential optimism is connected to the convictions about nature and the world (see also: Czapiński, 1985, 2005; Siciński, 1972; Seligman, 2002; Stach, 2006, broadly discussed in the introduction to this part of the book). Research conducted with adults indicates that functional optimism is greater than essential – which indicates, that people perceive the reality over which they have more influence in more optimistic terms. Is this tendency also present among teenagers? Does it also pertain to such a complex and burning issue as poverty?

If the answers to the above questions are affirmative, then one should investigate the bases of such optimism. It was possible thanks to data gathered in the interviews with focus groups (24), to which 4-5 random pupils were chosen from each class.

In this paper we would like to present quantitative data from four countries. More detailed analyses is done on the data collected in Poland.

Understanding poverty

One of the pioneers of research into this field, a British sociologist Benjamin Rowntree (1901), defined poverty by as minimal income necessary for survival. This is how poverty is defined by the youngest children:

'But there are also sick people, who could not afford medicine, or they... spent all their money on medicine, which did not help anyway, they lost their apartments... jobs... and they beg in front of churches...' - Girls, 11 years old

The category of absolute poverty is mentioned not only by the youngest children. References to it can be also found among older students, their descriptions point, however, to a more complex understanding of poverty:

‘Someone can not feel poor, because they don’t feel the need to go to the cinema or somewhere, but they have very low income. And they are indeed poor, but they don’t feel it. Someone else can earn a lot and spend a lot on some stuff and still feel poor.’ - Boy, 14

Such perception of poverty refers to its individual evaluation by the person involved and it depends on subjective needs and realizing ones possibilities. Subjective poverty was researched in the 70s by Goedhard (1997). He pointed out that one’s feelings and convictions about one’s situation determine belonging to a particular social class and, through it – taking action to change the situation.

The oldest pupils perceive poverty in most complex terms, they consider its social and psychological dimensions:

‘A child wants to buy a new piece of clothing or have money for parties and all things needed for parties and they can’t afford it.’ – Girl, 17

Seventeen year olds point out, that poverty is relative. They see social inequality as the main determinant of poverty. Poverty is a social problem, so social references and comparisons are significant in its perception. A British sociologist, Peter Townsend (1979), also stresses that personal needs are determined by culture and social rules, norms and climate. In some communities a computer or a car are basic household appliances, in others – a luxury.

Statements made by the oldest pupils indicate, that poverty is also the inability to lead a normal life or a spiritual poverty:

‘Poverty is connected to internal poverty, insufficiency of something... spiritual.’ – Girl, 17

And that it inhibits self-realization:

‘No job in the future, no perspectives. Unfulfilled ambitions. No money, no provision for the future.’ – Boy, 17

Such perception of poverty was proposed by Hindu economist, Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen (1981). He points out, that poverty means living in conditions, which make it impossible to enjoy freedom and lead a life that one would find valuable. This includes education, healthcare or cultural participation. Such idea of poverty indicates it as a reason for social exclusion.

Sociologists notice the criminalization of poverty, stressing that in modern culture, poverty is perceived as dangerous (Bauman, 1997a). In most statements given by 14 and 17 year olds, poverty is related to pathology:

‘For me, poverty is connected to pathology... (...) if there is poverty, then usually there is alcoholism, parents beat up their kids, there is no money for books.’ – Girl, 14

There are some attempts to overthrow the stereotype of a poor person as someone outside societal norms:

‘It’s no pathology, but if someone does not have the money to function normally in a society.’ – Girl, 17

To sum up, young people, upon gaining their first social experiences, understand poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon. Their opinions can be traced back to main theoretical conceptions of poverty: absolute poverty, relative, subjective or related to the inability to lead a normal life. The older the students, fewer references are made to objective determinants and more to personal perceptions and social comparisons. Young people opinions also include socially rooted stereotypes connected to pathology.

In further part we will analyze young people’s opinions about causes and mechanism of poverty emergence.

Causes of poverty

Even the first theoreticians of poverty (Rowntree, 1901) distinguished two types of poverty: primary poverty, connected to shortfalls; and secondary – a result of thriftlessness. Young people also see those two types, but there are significant age differences. Younger students, no matter where they come from stress the primary aspect of poverty:

‘If someone begs, for instance, because their house burned down. It could have happened, that he lost all his family, his dad, and his dad devised everything to the sister of that man and now that sister or that man are trying to gather some money, like, they kneel on a blanket in front of a church with a can or a cup.’ – Boy, 11

‘Maybe someone was poor from the start. I mean, his ancestors were poor and when he was born, he was poor.’ – Boy, 11

In their opinion poor people situation is caused by objective, external factors. The opinions of older pupils, especially from small towns indicate a deterministic understanding of poverty as persistent, independent of luck, situation or coincidence:

‘Simply no job. If someone lives in the country and there are no jobs for them. It’s just like that.’ – Girl, 14

A Polish sociologist, Elżbieta Tarkowska (2000; 2002) indicates, that attitudes towards poverty and the interpretation of the mechanisms of poverty emergence are mostly connected to the position in the society. The lower that position is, the more external the perceived determinants thereof. The rich or people who are better educated see the sources of poverty in personal predispositions. Such regularity was absent in the interviews with students. Both students from small towns and the capital city focused on secondary poverty:

'People spend money on useless things... they don't think of their futures. If someone can't afford it, they should not spend money on an expensive computer.' – Boy, 14, town

'Poverty mostly comes from laziness and resourcelessness, because they were raised this way.' – Girl, 17, city

There are many causes of poverty but they mostly revolve around irresponsibility for one's future and personal characteristics: passiveness, lack of initiative, laziness, unwillingness to work.

Older students also mention generational causes of poverty:

'Very often you die, where you were born. If you were born in slums, you will probably die there, unless you get out. I think that people stay in their environment and it is hard to get away from something you know from the start, people you hang out with. It is very difficult to change your social group, where you grew up. I read this article about the Romany and in a special school they asked who they want to be in the future. They said they would like to be pensioners. They just don't see the need to work, they are happy to live off pensions and they don't care for warm water or washing their clothes other than with their hands. They just want to live and play cards and do nothing. This suits them'. – Boy, 14

The difficulty in 'escaping' poverty is caused by imprinted attitudes toward the world, a specific set of values, which can constitute the most important poverty-nursing factor. Students of all ages point to education as an important factor, which may shield from poverty:

'If someone does not want to learn, they won't have money, because they won't have a good job.' – Boy, 17

Also in this area, students mention some limitations:

'One has to go to the university and... graduate. You can't just graduate from primary school and do anything. Some don't have money for university and other things.' – Boy, 11

Young people's understanding of the sources and limited chances for escaping poverty indicate, that the students reflect upon and carefully observe social issues. Younger pupils perceive poverty as a default. The older ones trace it back to personal characteristics: skills, talents and attitudes. They also point to factors, which inhibit getting away from poverty. These are usually education and family. The family, by influencing attitudes and values, is the most common factor facilitating poverty reproduction, but the barriers present within education system make it impossible to escape it. The situation in Poland, in contrast to other countries, seems unfavourable. In Poland, children whose parents have university degrees graduate 10 times more often

from universities than of parents with primary education. In western countries the factor is only 3,5 (Social Situation Report, 2008).

Young people's optimism towards poverty

In reference to optimism towards poverty we asked two questions:

Do you think there will be *more poverty* or *less poverty* in your local area in the future than today?

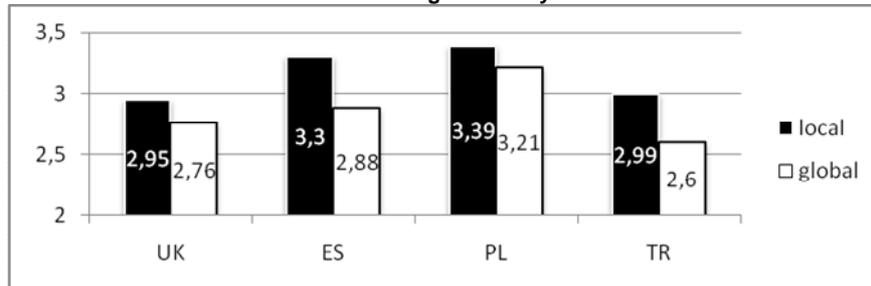
Do you think there will be *more poverty* or *less poverty* in the world in the future than today?

The students indicated answers on a scale (1-5) - low values correspond to high levels of poverty (low optimism), high values to low levels of poverty (high optimism). Below are the data on the perception of poverty in the future in different countries according to age and gender.

Perceptions of poverty in the local and global perspectives

Young people manifest greater optimism towards poverty in the local area, than in the world [$t(2416)=10.86$ $p<0.001$].

Graph 1. The level of optimism towards poverty in the local and global perspectives according to country



The level of this optimism depends on national differences [$F(3/2452)=19.06$ $p<0.001$]. Poles manifest a significantly greater levels of optimism ($M=3.21$, $SD=1.13$) than students from other countries - Spain ($M=2.88$, $SD=1.06$, $p<0.001$), Turkey ($M=2.60$, $SD=1.45$, $p<0.001$) and the United Kingdom ($M=2.76$, $SD=1.13$, $p<0.001$).

One should thus ponder the causes of young Poles' particular optimism towards poverty in the future. If we look closely at the poverty characteristics in Poland, we can see factors similar to those of entire Europe (Tarkowska, 2007), such as persistent poverty in enclaves – isolation of poverty and its replication mentioned before. The next factor is the connection of poverty with unemployment and education. Education, according to young people, is a factor allowing for a way out of poverty. There are, however, two main factors distinguishing Polish poverty from European. In Europe, especially Western Europe, poverty is a problem mainly in big cities. In Poland it pertains to rural areas. This factor seems, however, insignificant in the perception of poverty. As indicated in our research, which was discussed above, there are no significant differences

in the perception of future poverty between young people from big cities and small towns. The another factor, specific to Poland, is the poverty of children and adolescents – malnutrition and negligence in terms of basic needs, which places Poland at the bottom of the list of developed countries. According to Tarkowska (2007) it is age, that is the main characteristic of Polish poverty. Teachers stress (Krupa, 2005), that children often prefer to get bad marks for not having their handbooks, than admitting that their parents can't afford them. Older students who participated in the interviews notice this problem:

'In our area you can see that... in school... how they are dressed or something, you can see who is poor, it's apparent.' – Boy, 17, town

'...an example: a class trip to the theatre and he can't afford the ticket.' – 17 Boy, town

Those opinions are not mere complaining about other people's difficult situation. Students relate them to the problem of coping and to the support provided by classmates:

'I think he does that... I have a couple of friends, who are poor but... you can't see it. When we go somewhere, we chip in for him. There is ten of us and OK, if someone doesn't have money, everyone chips in so that he can go with us.' – Boy, 17, town

'In my opinion it is important, that one doesn't push people who are poor into the dregs of society. One should absolutely lend a helping hand, share and not... press – always ahead, away from poverty, not jostle and pretend that it's not there, but lend a hand.' – Girl, 17, city

Perhaps it is sensing support or readiness to give it and positive experiences connected to it, that enhance optimism.

It is worth mentioning that optimism in the perception of poverty among young people is consistent with its perception among adults. Euro-barometer from 2009 (Poverty and Social Exclusion, 2010) indicates that Poles see less poverty around them than other EU citizens. 7. We should, however, remember that Poland has made a huge step up in the economic development during the past years. Current well-being in contrast to that of few years before, may indeed enhance optimism and hope for a better future.

Polish students see many barriers that perpetuate poverty, but they also notice the possibilities that young people have, which can shield them from poverty:

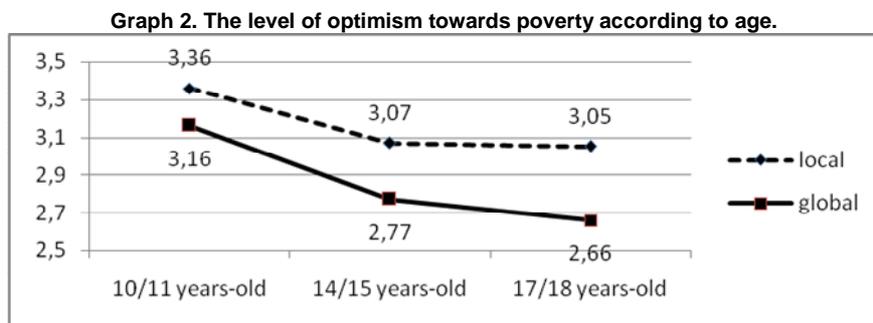
'I think that... first you need to invest in yourself, cause the world need lively, creative and active people – activists.' – Girl, 17, city

'It depends on our generation, if we try or not. If there is education, if people want to learn and get degrees, it will be easier for them to find jobs. There will be money... It depends also on motivation, if they don't have it, it's on them.' – Girl, 14, town

'It depends only on ourselves, if we learn, if we are ambitious. Then , I think, we will secure our future.' – Boy, 17, city

Optimism towards poverty according to gender and age

Gender does not influence optimism towards poverty in the local [F(1/2447)=0.03 ns.] or global perspectives [F(1/2425)=0.06 ns.]. Age, on the other hand, plays a significant role. The youngest students seem most optimistic towards their local area [F(2/2447)=15.01 p<0.001 10>14 and 18] and towards the global situation [F(2/2424)=40.60 p<0.001 10>14 and 18].



The effect is significant for all countries except the United Kingdom. Basing on interviews with young Poles we will try to identify the characteristics of optimism in the youngest group. This is what 11 year olds say about the future:

'In my opinion it will be better, cause there are those various fund-raising.' – Girl, 11

'Before, they haven't seen that someone is poor, cause they were poor themselves, so what do they care about others. Now they start to see, pay attention to the poor and help them.' – Girl, 11

Children see the need for mutual help. Help is always described in general terms and the opinions are enigmatic, pointing out that it will be better, because people will be better, they will know and understand more. 14 year olds, on the other hand name more specific justifications:

'It depends on our generation, if we try or not. If there is education, if people want to learn and get degrees, it will be easier for them to find jobs. There will be money... It depends also on motivation, if they don't have it, it's on them. Cause if someone has the money, they don't care about others, they simply live their own lives and don't want to change anything.' - Girl, 14, town

'If things develop, then it is usually the richest who develop, who had resources and invested money. Those, who had nothing stay with nothing. Only those, who have opportunities can get richer. Those, who can't invest in education and their own lives will get nothing.' – Boy, 14

The above quotes indicate that escaping poverty is a complex matter depending on meaning of motivation, education, but also the possession of basic material resources that are needed to deal with poverty.

17 year olds are more pessimistic. They point out, that there are systemic factors, which can support escaping poverty, such as government, NGOs and business actions:

‘It depends on which way the state is heading, if it will be better or worse. How the social system will develop.’ – Boy, 17

‘Our government doesn’t do anything. Everyone would rather go to England or Ireland to work, rather than stay in Poland.’ – Boy, 17

The decrease of optimism, that comes with age can stem from a more mature way of thinking, and a better understanding of social processes and explaining them with various phenomena.

Conclusion

The level of optimism depends on nationality. Young Poles are the most optimistic in their perceptions of poverty in comparison to other nationalities. There are some characteristics of young Poles’ perceptions of poverty, which are worth mentioning. Firstly, although poverty in Poland is mostly present in small towns (as opposed to ‘European’ poverty in urban agglomerations), there are no differences in the evaluations of and opinions about poverty between Poles from small towns and big cities. Secondly, young Poles talk about those issues more in terms of coping and trying to overcome it, than mere complaining. Thirdly, Polish students see many possible ways of avoiding poverty or unemployment. Two of them are especially worth mentioning – the willingness to learn and motivation to work and act. This is probably the result of the Polish government’s promotion (also in the media) of education. At the same time, democracy and free trade enhance values connected to productivity ethics, which in the 90s were still rare in the Polish social life (Doliński 1995). This does not mean that young Poles are indiscriminate in their evaluations of reality. They see many systemic issues, e.g. equal chances in education availability, corruption or the necessity to look for a job abroad.

One should stress, that high levels of optimism among young Poles do not stem from its superficial perception. Young people’s statements can be related to sociological, psychological and economic conceptions. With age, poverty become less objective and measurable dimensions – they become more complex, psychological and subjective. Young people could not escape typical stereotypes connected to the perceptions of poverty. Similarly to adults, they think that the unemployed are usually poor, and poverty is connected to pathology, which might nurse social exclusion and fixation of poverty enclaves.

To sum up, young people’s optimistic picture of poverty results from various factors, i.e. cultural specificity connected to high levels of essential and functional optimism, or to the change in socially acceptable values, such as appreciating education and motivation

to work, as well as economic specificity connected to a noticeable increase in well-being.

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