

## THE PROCESS OF ADAPTATION TO SOCIAL CHANGE AS A FACTOR STIMULATING THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTH

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The article attempts to present – on the basis of relevant literature – the explicit strategies of adaptation to social change, on the example of the Polish society/nation. The hereby reflections are of theoretical character. They refer to the consequences of social changes taking place in Poland as well as the youth adaptation processes in the context of changing reality. The youth is presented in the context of their life orientations, existential anxiety, reevaluations and attitudes displayed with reference to the adaptation strategies described in the literature on the subject. The identification of the determinants for the conditions which promote the social manifestation of either active or passive attitudes is an attempt to stress the informative role of education in initiating both realistic and creative forms of adaptive behavior that should result in the individual's need to challenge the reality. What is most important, however, is that adaptation to social change becomes [by itself] a stimulant for the development of a young human being.

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### Introduction

Each social change has its own consequences balance. Apart from the positive, negative, progressive or regressive consequences, as the result of the content of a change, there are also negative consequences resulting from the sole fact that it is a change. In case of regressive changes of content origin, the balance is rather negative as it is also subject to the dysfunction of a change as such. Nevertheless, it is also possible for changes of ambivalent balance to occur, as stated by P. Sztompka, “the most striking situation occurs when changes progressive in content, of positive results, have the other negative

side due to the fact that they are changes that disturb the balance and status quo, causing discontinuity, questioning the habits and customs (Sztompka 2000: 11).

The changes occurring in Poland at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries contribute to strong pressure of several, simultaneously taking place processes of modernization, globalization, transformation and integration. At the same time, “we happened to find ourselves in the whirl of constant, dynamic and unpredictable changes (for some generations for the third time in their lives!). Such processes become a

new challenge for individuals, groups and entire societies causing experience of dissatisfaction and frustration. More and more people fail to cope with these challenges, expressing indifference or resigning from activity and creative tasks” (Nikitorowicz 2005:13).

Hence, it might be the reason for the issue of society adaptation to occurring changes to play significant role in the field of sociological matters directly referring to most symptomatic phenomena of the contemporary social reality. The aim of this paper is the reflection over social change in the context of recognized strategies supporting the process of adaptation to the change. The analysis of the adaptation issue itself and presentation of adaptation strategies distinguishing societies from one another at the time of change will be accompanied by the reflection over the youth in the context of their chances of successful adaptation to the changing living conditions.

## Results and discussion adaptational contexts of social change

Social change that becomes the background for this deliberation is perceived as “a set of inevitable processes due to which the society moves towards another level of development. The already existing and binding forms of social life are becoming gradually extinct as the new ones are coming into life, corresponding to the changing conditions, needs and expectations” (Radziewicz-Winnicki 2004: 30). As the quoted author suggests, the notion of social changes “embraces both accidental and minor transformations, seemingly irrelevant, taking place within individual attitudes, of less importance for the existence of a group in various spheres of its collective existence (i.e. fashion, lifestyles, jargon), as well as permanent changes, of key importance, transforming current functions of individuals and social groups in given structure”.

The process of transformation, just like any other difficult situation specified by ina-

dequacy of needs, conditions and actions and being a source of stress, enables the emergence of adaptational reactions. Often “the sole anticipation of changes may cause adaptational reactions. The necessity of altering life style, changing a job, social pressure or changing the social status, anything forcing us to face the unknown – it all may result in adaptational reactions” (Milic-Czerniak 1999: 54). Perhaps this is why each society works out concepts presenting the solutions to complicated problems of modern times, working out own adaptational strategies at the same time.

The notion *adaptation* derives from the Latin word *adaptatio* and in similar form exists in numerous contemporary languages. It spread to social science from biological and medical disciplines, where it is used interchangeably with the notion *adjusting*. It means both a process and a kind of a state of adaptation. Social adaptation in most general perception implies individual behaviour conformity with requirements and cultural standards, formally or informally determined by the environment. It is also frequently used in a narrow meaning, referring to relations with others, and to social interactions as such (Synak 1982: 24).

In sociology this notion is generally associated with wide range of features, as it may refer both to changes occurring within personality, society or culture, and to those changes that facilitate functioning of given system. “Although the notion *adaptation* even in such wide meaning is often used interchangeably with the term *adjustment*, we may come across some attempts to distinguish the semantic range of these definitions. The term *adaptation* is usually assigned with superiority, as adaptation is perceived as the first stage of adaptational processes, based on external individual adaptation to new circumstances. (...) The distinction between *adaptation* and *adjustment* often comes down to the level of individual or collective adaptation in environment. If perceived from this angle, *adaptation* means the process of changes occurring within individuals (groups) indispensable for the existence and functioning

in given environment, whereas *adaptation* in general meaning denotes the process enabling individuals (or groups) to enter harmonious and balanced relations with the surrounding” (Synak 1982: 19).

From the psychological point of view, the notion *adaptation* used interchangeably with the notion *adjustment*, refers to, in general, specific anthropic, social and cultural environment, being perceived as a process enabling individuals to reach the condition of relative balance between own needs and external conditions or requirements. Hence, it is tightly linked with the possibilities of individual needs satisfaction. According to Z. Zaborowski, it comes down to “the appropriate orientation in surrounding circumstances, requirements and social standards, precise knowledge on own talents, needs, tendencies and interests, selection of adequate tools of action guaranteeing reaching the goal and experiencing self adaptation” (Zaborowski 1962: 119).

K. Dąbrowski, representing the psychiatry perspective, distinguishes “primitive” and “positive” adaptation. The first one, unfavourable from the personality point of view, means entire subordination towards “ordinary” requirements of the environment, enabling facilitation of satisfying own, primitive aspirations. The “positive” adaptation is an individual tendency to transformation, to “existence at higher level of own, internal environment” (Dąbrowski 1965: 11).

As far as pedagogy is concerned, complex adaptation to current social requirements is perceived as a state impossible to be reached, unfavourable for the individuals, in contradiction to their own creative possibilities (with the exception of sociological concept of pedagogy according to which the process of upbringing is based on adaptation to the already existing conditions). Hence the idea of “upbringing for the future”, developing active approach, preparing the youth for life in changeable reality (Bandura 1979: 24, citing Synak).

Summing up this part of reflections it may be stated, that the way of perceiving the notion “adaptation” by social science is of axiological

dimension, indicating the division between positive and negative adaptation at the same time. However, introducing such division becomes some sort of a trap as A. Titkow claims: “speaking of good or bad adaptation is establishing the standards of appropriate (for some reasons) experiencing or behaviour at the same time. It is concurrently the establishment of favourable conditions for identifying good adaptation with conformism and the struggle of any kind of change or reform with pathological conduct” (Titkow 1993: 140).

### Adaptational attitudes towards the change

As it has been already mentioned, changes occurring in Poland are still of wide range and rapid pace – the globalization processes have been interwoven with the European integration and system transformation challenges. Such situation may facilitate potential shifts in attitudes: from passive witnessing of occurring transformations into more or less active participation in such.

Generally, it is assumed that individual reaction to a change may be of **passive** or **active** character (Beskid, Milic-Czerniak, Sufin 1995: 135).

The first pattern of conduct implies adaptation of external circumstances to own needs and preferences, increasing the effort in order to achieve reachable means, at least sustaining to the furthest extent the level enabling perseverance of consumption patterns being previously carried out. “It is not about maximizing mere financial income but also about activity of searching and taking up better-paid job, investing in own business, securities, etc.”

Therefore, pro-adaptational actions, i.e. such as the one, “open to change”, imply gathering information and essential resources of action tools and their instrumentalisation. A. Ziemilski divides the active adaptation into reactive and anticipating one. The first one, forced by circumstances, is at times implied *ex post* – as

the reply to the change in progress that may not, or is not a subject to be stopped. On the other hand, the anticipating adaptation is considered as rational and purposeful preparation for anticipated (nevertheless not always desirable) states. In theory it is often referred to as various educational programmes that shall stimulate prospective thinking and acting, accompanied by intellectually structured vision of the future (Ziemilski 1995: 22).

The additional asset empowering active approach is positive, direct or indirect, experience of resourcefulness of individual or environmental character with significant socialization influence over the individuals, having, for instance, the source in a family.

The **passive** attitude, also referred to as “adaptive stiffness” (Pankowski 1997: 32) is a feature of those, fearing necessity of undertaking radical changes in own life, being convinced it implies high costs (not only in financial dimension). It is the attitude of experiencing anxiety about handling the coming day, fears and lack in faith in possibility of reaching life success. Lack of gaining control over own life, no resistance to occurring difficulties and tendency to resign from undertaken goals are also specific for such individuals. Such attitude is also referred to as the “hedgehog strategy” (Czapiński 1993: 25) since it is expressed in limiting the usage of many products and services, prolonging the period of using certain goods and items, restricting expenses and displaying claiming attitude. However, the passive attitudes are often the life necessity, not always the result of own choice.

The array of choice for such attitudes includes advanced age, bad health condition, being made redundant, sense of temporality and helplessness. These factors determine sense of security that is a crucial stimulus shaping attitudes, aspirations and actions of a society (one of the consequences of transformation process is the steady fall in the level of fulfilling this need) (Marody 1991: 9).

Notwithstanding, as L. Beskid proves, large proportion of Polish society is active. Their activity is displayed, for instance, in striving for

improvement of economic situation of a household, increasing the income by changing or improving qualifications, moving from public to private sector or taking up actions on own account.

## Youth and the change

Basing on the above-mentioned reflections it may be concluded that social change, understood as the moment of throwing individuals off their daily routine functioning, makes them work out new cultural competences, absorbing or even systematically processing or working out new-own-spheres of actions and communication channels in conformity with the new reality. The response to a change, i.e. individually recognized strategy enabling adaptation to changing reality, depends on the ability to read out new cultural codes—hence it is determined by skills, level of culture or types of viewpoints, nevertheless, it generally depends on the results of socialization that individuals are subject to in the course of their lives. Therefore it seems rather obvious that the level of civilizational competences of the educational institutions of an individual or a group has influence on the nature of attitudes towards changes. Among all institutions conditioning individual behaviour or adaptation to external world there is nothing of more importance than a family. Both the axionormative system and the attitudes displayed in everyday life become the source of experience and knowledge for a young man referring to how and on what moral standards should be the functioning based. The patterns of active attitudes of family origin facilitate the development of young individuals that should be characterized in the future by tendency to “changing the world”, enriching the accumulated experience, lack of fear of the external world challenges, growth of own personality and creativity. Consequently, it aims at social promotion. On the other hand, setting example of passive attitudes becomes the cause of individual adaptation within the range of

coming to terms with current conditions, subordination, mediocrity, passive anticipation and sense of helplessness. The result, at its best, is the process of inheriting specific features of social position of an individual, such as poverty, unemployment, lack of education, low social status, sense of helplessness, etc. "Sense of helplessness, similarly as sense of control over own life, undoubtedly constitutes this kind of psychological properties that are in the process of their creation related to individual experience, previous failures or successes in coping with social reality. Concurrently, on the other hand this helplessness dimension versus sense of control may become a crucial factor determining our attitudes and actions, particularly in entirely new situations and towards problems with no already worked out social patterns of behaviour" (Marody 2000: 83).

The social contexts of development make the youth face new challenges. Coping with them may become a unique chance to accomplish own aspirations, plans or dreams, but on the other side not taking them up may bring about a sense of stagnation in the next decades of life. The factors in favour of taking up such challenges may be noticed in the features of the youth such as open attitude towards the world, searching approach and the basic need of youth to change reality appropriately to the own vision of the world (Zandecki 1994: 160).

Social expectation from the youth to eagerly response to new challenges in the period of accelerated social change is not always justified. „It happens so because chances for young people in Poland in their own view are whether blocked or vague" (Fatyga, Fluderska, Wertenstein-Żuławski 1994: 6). On the basis of rich literature on the subject it may be certainly and definitely stated that the most frightful group of highest sense of deprivation, insecurity and threat is the youth itself. However, paradoxically, it turns out that it is also the youth itself who becomes the driving force of the processes accompanying the change. The very same youth that "perceives the reality as threat" (Koralewicz-Zębiak 1987: 84), or "in the situation of change perceives a

gap between values they claim as own (such as patriotism, rationality, social discipline) and the possibility to satisfy them" (Kwieciński 1987: 288). In order to confirm this thesis I shall recall the works of W. Misiak, where the author, analyzing the behaviour of young people, indicates specific innovation of adaptational strategies towards the situation in Poland in the second half of 1980s, describing it as "new ways of resourcefulness". "The youth – as the cited author claims – was faced with transformations reaching far beyond their life aspirations, attitudes and life orientations (...).

Generalizing the conclusions, significant dynamics of attitudes and social mobility of the surveyed youth may be indicated. The mobility was predominantly expressed in intellectual dimension, in the sphere of values, attitudes, affiliation in social, professional, political and religious circles. Moreover, the mobility was followed by given factual steps undertaken such as working aboard, moving to performing a work "on own account" and the from-city-to-village migrations" (Misiak 1988: 100).

It is therefore noticeable, as B. Fatyga proves (Fatyga, Fluderska, Wertenstein-Żuławski 1994: 6), that although contemporary youth lacks in "revolutionary craze", in fact, it practices rational, often very realistic adaptational strategies.

## Conclusions

The reflections over youth in the context of their life orientation, "life chances", existential anxiety, attitudes' modification and reevaluation taking place in the context of recognized strategies of coping with contemporary challenges, become an issue that has been playing a crucial role for the past years in the sphere of research examination. The results are noticeable in the in-depth analysis of the processes of aspirations transformations in the context of social and cultural heritage carried out by individuals and social groups from former social and political formation.

In the aspect of deliberations on the ways of youthful rebelliousness against the status quo

and coping with it by the generation “affected” by social change it is recognized, that individuals changing themselves and the surroundings (gaining control over it and gradually becoming independent from it) reach the state of harmony with own environment, what in consequence becomes the condition of appropriate adaptation. In order for this condition to become met, the individuals shall legitimate appropriate predispositions and competences, often acquired within the process of socializing. It also often happens so that the rooted patterns of behaviours and habits preserved during the process of socialization become the obstacles on the way to reach the above-mentioned goal.

It is also crucial for the individuals’ life activity or passiveness whether they are the subjects or objects of social life. The subjectivity takes place when the individuals’ actions are aware, initiated and developed according to their own values. The sense of subjectivity, which should be experienced by the young individuals, is determined by two other crucial factors – sense of cause and the awareness of being in control of actions that one is a part of. It is worth emphasizing here, that the sense of subjectivity is not solely a sense of control over the reality, but also sense of relation and integration with it.

Various kinds of determinants facilitating given attitudes towards changes, as well as new, not necessarily already (yet) recognized challenges of current reality, as all displayed within the course of these deliberations, inspire to in-depth reflection over the need for new educational programmes enabling real chances for a young individual to adapt to the situation of a change. Nevertheless, competent opposition of a global man to the traditional one, rooted in the tradition of schematic way of thinking and actions, appears to be a challenge for a widely understood education as well. In the preferable educational programmes the aim should be to shape such individuals that in the process of up-grading own “self” and shaping own identity, they would take up tasks and challenges reaching beyond their personal interest.

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## ADAPTACIJOS PRIE SOCIALINIŲ POKYČIŲ PROCESAS KAIP JAUNIMO VYSTYMĄSI STIMULIUOJANTIS VEIKSNYS

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Straipsnyje analizuojamos refleksijos yra teorinio pobūdžio. Remiantis mokslininkų (sociologų, edukologų) darbais, vertinama sociumo kaita: pozityvūs pokyčiai lydimi negatyvių, progresas neatskiriamas nuo regresio. Akivaizdi pusiausvyros problema. Jaunimas – specifinė socialinė grupė, kuri, adaptuodamasi prie sparčiai kintančio sociumo, įveikia nemažai prieštaravimų. Refleksijos remiasi socialinių pokyčių pasekmėmis ir įžvalgomis Lenkijoje. Pokyčiai, vykstantys XX–XXI a., jungia atskirus procesus: socializaciją, modernizaciją, globalizaciją, transformaciją, integraciją, todėl ir analizuojami laikantis holizmo principo. Jaunimo adaptacijos procesas pateikiamas ir gvildenamas sociumo kaitos (gyvenimo tikslų, egzistencinio nerimo, pervertinimo ir požiūrių, atskleistų pagal literatūroje apibrėžtas subjekto adaptacines strategijas) kontekste.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** socialiniai pokyčiai, jaunimas, adaptacija, požiūriai.

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