

Anita Gulczyńska: Stigmatization of Children and Youth of the Socially Non-homogeneous Neighborhoods

Analysis of the Mechanisms of the Neighborhood Effects and the Concept of Empowering Social Work

Anita Gulczyńska

A szociálisan nem homogén szomszédsági környezetben élő gyerekek és fiatalok stigmatizációja

A szomszédsági mechanizmus elemzése és a szociális munka empowermentjének koncepciója

Absztrakt

A kézirat a szomszédsági hatás koncepciójának mechanizmusát mutatja be, amely egy empirikusan megalapozott, hosszú távú, Łódź egyik hátrányos helyzetű lakókörnyezetében készített kvalitatív tanulmány. A kutatás elmélete beleilleszkedik abba a modellbe, amely a környezeti hatást a szomszédságbeli társadalmi folyamatok tekintetében magyarázza. Leginkább a szociális heterogenitás és az adott lakossági csoportok ebből következő stigmatizációja szempontjából kínál magyarázatot a környezeti hatásra. A stigmatizációs folyamat rekonstruálása és ennek a kiválasztott lakossági csoportokra – gyerekekre és fiatalokra – való hatása inspirált arra, hogy a társadalmilag nem homogén környezetben végzett szociális munka empowermentjéhez hozzájáruljak.

Kulcsszavak: szomszédsági hatás, stigmatizáció, szociális munka

Abstract

The manuscript presents a concept of the mechanisms of the neighborhood effects which has been empirically grounded in a long-term qualitative study conducted by me in one of Łódź disadvantaged residential environments. The theory generated during the study fits into a model that explains the neighborhood impact in terms of social processes endogenous to the neighborhood. In particular, it offers an explanation of the neighborhood impact in terms of social heterogeneity and consequential stigmatization of the selected groups of residents. The reconstruction of the stigmatization process and its outcomes for the selected groups of residents – children and youth – inspired my reflection on empowering social work in socially non-homogeneous neighborhoods, which I also put forward in this contribution.

Key words: neighborhood effects, stigmatization, social work

Bevezető megjegyzések a szomszédsági hatás mechanizmusának fogalmaihoz

A társadalomtudományok irodalmának áttekintése gazdag empirikus bizonyítékokkal szolgál a szomszédsági hatás mechanizmusának megértéséhez. Ez motivált arra, hogy kísérletet tegyek a szomszédsági hatásra vonatkozó ismeretek magasabb absztrakciós szinten való rendszerezésére. Ennek eredményeként a szomszédsági hatás mechanizmusának érdekes tipológiáira bukkantam (Samson–Morenoff–Gannon-Rowley 2002; Jarrett–Jefferson 2003; Galster 2010). Az ehhez hasonló rendszerező művek különösképpen fontosak az ilyen környezetben végzett szociális munka sokszínű céljainak feltárásához és új megjelenési formái elősegítéséhez.

Ezen rendelkezésre álló források között George C. Galster megközelítése tűnik a legkomplexebbnek. George C. Galster számos idevonatkozó tanulmány elemzését követően a szomszédsági hatás mechanizmusának következő kategóriáit különböztette meg: környezeti, földrajzi, intézményi és szociális-interaktív mechanizmusok (Galster 2010).

Galster szerint a környezeti mechanizmus „a helyi tér természetes és ember által alkotott tulajdonságaira utal, amelyek közvetlenül hatást gyakorolhatnak a lakosok mentális és/vagy fizikai egészségére anélkül, hogy viselkedésüket befolyásolnák” (Galster 2010: 2). Ilyenek például, hogy a lakosok mennyire erőszakos környezetben élnek, vagy hogy a fizikai környezet adott elemeinek milyen (a lakosok által tapasztalt) lélektani hatásai vannak, vagy hogy mennyire van az emberi egészség kitéve mérgező anyagoknak (Anderton et al. 1994).

A földrajzi mechanizmus a „terület azon aspektusaira utal, amelyek befolyásolhatják a lakosok életútját. Ezek a mechanizmusok nem a szomszédság keretein belül formálódnak, hanem inkább környezetpolitikai és gazdasági erőterekben való elhelyezkedése miatt jönnek létre” (Galster 2010: 5).

Másrészt a különböző intézmények alkalmazottai által az életesélyekre és a közösség lakosainak társadalmi inklúziójára kifejtett hatás folyamatainak és irányának elemzését az intézményi mechanizmus terminusa öleli fel (Galster 2010). Empirikusan bizonyított a kapcsolat az oktatás minősége és a szomszédsági hátrány között (Atkinson–Kintrea 2001), csakúgy, mint a lakosok magasabb szintű szükségleteinek kompenzációs szintje és a hátrányos szomszédság között (Hastings 2009). Másrészt tudományosan bizonyítható, hogy az állami iskolák közösségi mediátorokként működnek (Teitler–Weiss 1996).

Végül, de nem utolsósorban, vannak olyan társadalmi interaktív mechanizmusok a lakókörnyezetben, amelyek a közösségen belüli társadalmi folyamatokat mutatják be. Egyrészt a közösség mint interakciós entitás jelenik meg, amelyben a társadalmi rendet az

aktív társadalmi szereplők közötti társadalmi tevékenységek tartják fent. Ezek a szereplők megvitatják a társadalmi normákat, amelyekhez alkalmazkodnak (vagy nem), megteremtik a belső ellenőrzési mechanizmusokat, kötelekeket stb. (Sampson–Groves 1989). A közösség ezen leírások szerint mint egy társadalmilag viszonylag homogén entitás jelenik meg. Másrészt léteznek a lakosokra ható szomszédsági hatásoknak olyan fogalmai, amelyek hajtóereje a „mátság”. Ezek között található olyan magyarázatok, amelyek a közösség jólétben élő csoportjai közötti korlátozott források okozta relatív hiány eredményeként a lakossági csoportok közötti forrásokért folyó verseny fontosságát hangsúlyozzák, vagy pedig aláhúzzák a szülői mediáció fontosságát a közösségben élő fiatalok különböző területeken végbemenő fejlődésében (Sampson–Groves 1989).

A szomszédsági hatás mechanizmusának különböző modelljei nagy lehetőséget tartogatnak a szociális munka területén. A közösség hosszú távú kvalitatív vizsgálata és működésének megértése a szomszédság mechanizmusának egyedülálló rekonstruálását teszi lehetővé, és így a helyileg érzékeny fejlődés kifogyhatatlan inspirációs forrásává válhat.

Tanulmányom a lengyelországi Łódź egyik hátrányos helyzetű közösségében végzett hosszú távú kvalitatív kutatás dokumentációja. A kutatás főleg az ebben a környezetben élő fiatalok egy csoportjára fókuszál. Tanulmányom ezen csoportok mindennapi életének interaktív perspektivikus szempontjából való ábrázolását tűzte célul, hangsúlyozva a mindennapi életükben megmutatkozó közösségi hatások megértésének és a szociális munka eredményeinek fontosságát ezekben a szignifikánsnak bizonyuló folyamatokban.

Introductory remarks on the concepts of the mechanisms of the neighborhood effects

Literature review within social sciences reveals rich empirical evidence of the **mechanisms of the neighborhood effects**. This has encouraged me to take up an attempt to systematize the knowledge of the neighborhood effects on a higher level of abstraction. As a consequence, I have come across interesting typologies of the mechanisms of the neighborhood effects (Samson, Morenoff, Gannon-Rowley, 2002; Jarrett, Jefferson, 2003; Galster, 2010). Such systematizing works are particularly crucial for social work implications in the neighborhoods, since they allow us to discover the diversity of its objectives and to stimulate the development of its new forms.

Among these available sources, the proposal of George C. Galster seems to be the most complete one. George C. Galster after following a review of several studies on this subject, distinguished certain categories of the mechanisms of the neighborhood effects, such

as environmental, geographical, institutional and social-interactive mechanisms (Galster, 2010).

Following Galster, environmental mechanisms 'refer to natural and human-made attributes of the local space that may affect directly the mental and/or physical health of residents without affecting their behaviors' (Galster, 2010: 2). They concentrate for instance on exposure to violence, the psychological effects (experienced by the residents) of the selected elements of the physical surroundings, or on the exposure of human health to toxic substances (Anderton et al., 1994).

Geographical mechanisms 'refer to aspects of spaces that may affect residents' life courses yet do not arise within the neighborhood but rather purely because of the neighborhood's location relative to larger-scale political and economic forces' (Galster, 2010: 5).

On the other hand, the analysis of the processes and direction of the impact exerted by the employees of various institutions on life opportunities and social inclusion of the neighborhood residents are presented by the descriptions grouped under the term of institutional mechanisms (Galster, 2010). There is an empirical evidence on the relationship between the quality of teaching and the neighborhood disadvantage (Atkinson, Kintrea, 2001) as well as on the linkages between the level of compensation of higher levels of needs of the residents and the disadvantage neighborhood (Hastings, 2009). On the other hand, there are scientific explorations proving that (public schools serve as mediators of neighborhood context (Teitler and Weiss, 1996).

Last but not least, there are social-interactive mechanisms in the residential environment that include the descriptions of social processes inside the neighborhood. On the one hand, they show the neighborhood as an interactional entity in which social order is being maintained in social action amongst active social actors. They negotiate social norms, conform (or not) to them, they create internal control mechanisms, bonds, etc. (Sampson and Groves, 1989). The neighborhoods appear to us in these descriptions as relatively socially homogenous entities. On the other hand, there are concepts of the neighborhood impact on its residents, whose driving force is the 'difference'. Among them we find the explanations emphasizing the importance of the competition for resources amongst residential groups in case of limited resources, relative deprivation resulting from the difference in the welfare between the groups living in the neighborhood, or explanations highlighting the importance of parental mediation for various spheres of development of the young residents in the neighborhood (Sampson and Groves, 1989).

The different models of the mechanisms of the neighborhood effects have, however, various potential for social work implications. Long-term qualitative and understanding insights into neighborhoods seem to result in unique reconstructions of neighborhood mechanisms and hence, become endless source of inspirations for locally sensitive developments.

This contribution documents a long-term qualitative research conducted by me in one of the disadvantaged neighborhoods in Łódź, Poland. Its main participants were the representatives of one of the groups of youngsters who inhabit this neighborhood. The depiction of their daily life in terms of the interactive perspective, with particular emphasis on these processes that had proven to be significant for the understanding of the neighborhood effects in their lives and social work implications, constitutes the content of this contribution.

Research outline¹

The research underpinning this reflection was a several-year participant observation of the youth of an unprivileged Łódź neighborhood. The theoretical grounds of the research are constituted by **symbolic interactionism** (Blumer, 1954). The logic of the research procedure was planned with respect to the **grounded theory method** (Glaser, Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss, Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2009). However, the identity of the researcher – a **social pedagogue** - seemed to openly modify the indications of the specified research method. The Polish tradition of combining research and action – not only in everyday social pedagogue-practitioner diagnostic activities, but also on the level of scientific research, naturally has made me a researcher who cannot be just an observer. Researcher's engagement in the dynamics of the research actors' daily experience seems to result in my engaged participation in the research context.

The neighborhood under the research is situated within a quarter of four streets in the center of Łódź and is recognized by Łódź inhabitants as impoverished and dangerous. 19th century houses, with gates leading to dark courtyards, constitute the architecture of the

¹ Parts of this paragraph with the outline of my research, the social climate and the infrastructure of the neighborhood in which the study was conducted have already been used in the earlier contributions: (Gulczyńska, 2007; Gulczyńska, 2012).

neighborhood². The courtyards resemble a decayed labyrinth of corridors linked with one another, allowing the inhabitants to avoid any contact with the outer world, simultaneously acting as a factor contributing to interior integration. None of these courtyards has a designated place for children or the youth. Yet, each of them plays the role of a meeting point for mothers taking care of their children, the unemployed adults, and older children who socially share this space in their daily routine. The gates – as a buffer space between the neighborhood and the outer world - are occupied by groups of youngsters (Gulczyńska, 2007; Gulczyńska, 2012). This fact induced situations in which they were socially categorized by outsiders as representatives of the at-risk groups such as "street kids," "difficult youth," etc.

In such context, **participant observation** aiming at the reconstruction of the perspective of a group of youngsters was conducted. The main actors of the observation were six boys - my neighbors - aged 14 – 22. My frequent contact with them in our common place of residence (neighborhood) was a direct inspiration for this study. As the research process advanced, I became engaged in different roles – a neighbor, a friend of the family, a street educator, a curator of a photographic exhibition presenting their photos of the neighborhood, an ‘advocate’ of the boys representing them in the relations with representatives of formal institutions, and finally a legal custodian of one of them.

The process of my **engaged participation**, accompanied by systematic registration of data and its simultaneous analysis, allowed me to work out a theory on interactional tactics of the social exclusion process of the youth from the socially non-homogenous neighborhood from their perspective. Comprehensive presentation of this process demands prior clarification of the key theoretical category reconstructed in the study- socially non-homogeneous neighborhood.

Stigmatization of children and youth from the socially non-homogeneous neighborhood as an example of the mechanisms of the neighborhood effects

The old Łódź neighborhood under research revealed differences in three dimensions:

- the kind of rights to the apartment possessed by the residents
- the importance of neighborhood in the lives of its inhabitants

² Łódź is an interesting, unusual city in terms of the processes of social segregation. Most impoverished households are accumulated in the city center and its surroundings, not in the suburbs. It is a significant feature for the interactions of the residents in the neighborhood and on the streets that surround it.

- the normative references shared by particular groups of residents.

A detailed description of the ways in which these characteristics tinge neighborly communication will help us understand the dynamics of the interactions and the ways they lead to social exclusion of some groups of young people in such neighborhoods.

With regard to the **type of right to the apartment**, neighborhood residents belong to one of two categories - **owners of apartments** and **tenants of apartments**. The owners of apartments become the members of housing cooperatives and hence have a formal impact on the forms of the territory distribution and development of infrastructure in the neighborhood. This reveals their administratively privileged position since they - regardless of the fact that they represent a numerical minority of residents - determine the conditions of use and distribution of the neighborhood by the 'non-privileged majority'. An example of such restrictions is the housing cooperative's decision of destroying a little wall (referred to by the young residents as *wally*) which was a meeting place for one of the adolescent groups, but also an attribute (symbol) important for their social identification amongst others. The decision taken without any participation of the unprivileged residents (children from the families who do not own the apartments) did not take into account the social distribution of the neighborhood territory, which resulted in the entire history of conflicts, where the perspective of that local group of young people was not taken into consideration.

The history of *wally* (like many others) shows that administrative constraints primarily include spatial solutions unfavorable from the perspective of the young residents of the neighborhood. Apartment owners are rarely those parents whose children spend their leisure in the neighborhood. The exclusion of certain categories of residents (e.g. children and young people) from the decisions regarding 'their place' leads in turn to their acts of neighborhood infrastructure degradation. This is due to their feeling of poor influence on the implementation of changes that would be consistent with their interests and also to the restrictions imposed by the owners of apartments hampering the young people's activity in the vicinity of their residential environment.

With respect to the **importance of the neighborhood for its residents**, there are two categories of neighbors: the **participants** and the **non-participants**. The former are mostly the residents of tenements and the latter - the privileged owners of apartments.

For the participants who represent the vast majority of the neighbors' community, the neighborhood is a socially significant space. They spend their time there and meet people who are important for them in life, creating a compact community. The non-participants - the

numerical minority - treat the neighborhood as a part of their way to work, a place to park their cars, etc. For them it is not a space for human interactions and they solely refer to the perspective of their own group interests.

The unequal access to formal authority in the place of residence and a difference in neighborhood importance lead to differences in the social expectations put forward by different groups of neighbors towards it. This fact significantly contextualizes communication between neighbors and makes it extremely vulnerable to disturbances and conflicts. It is manifested particularly strongly in the interactions of groups of children and youth with those who see no place for them in the neighborhood. Creative forms of changes implemented by children in the neighborhood territory and infrastructure encounter twofold resistance. On the one hand, the physical layer of the neighborhood is not easily transformed and adapted (concrete, brick, metal, etc.). On the other hand, their development activities in a hostile place are fought by the non-participants who do not understand them and become parties in long-term conflicts.

Understanding the interactive dynamics of these conflicts requires, however, a prior introduction into the third dimension of social heterogeneity of the neighborhood and into the **diversification of the normative references** to which the neighbors primarily relate in their mutual interactions both in the neighborhood and outside.

In the course of my research I noticed similarities between the mechanisms of maintenance of social order in the neighborhood, and the **concept of the social world** by Anselm Strauss (Strauss, 1969; Lindesmith A., Strauss A., and Denzin N.K., 1975). According to Strauss, the participants of the social world are people creating their own world, delimited by their effective communication. Participants of a social world seemingly understand and interpret facts from environment and seemingly response to them. (Kacperczyk, 2005). Having a close relationship, independent of time and space and of age or sex, its participants co-create a specific universe of discourse. The thing that unites them is not a common area of residence, but a specific 'cognitive perspective' which they intersubjectively create and shared and to which they refer to in their actions³.

Due to the differences in the cognitive perspective that become more pronounced in the way in which the neighborhood residents relate to one another in everyday contacts, there

³ This is a kind of their 'epistemological stance' which is revealed in their actions. It covers understandings and symbols which underpin their interpretation of the conduct of others and their responses to them.

can be distinguished two categories of inhabitants: the *homies* (I.e. the *hood*)⁴ and the ‘strangers’.

The social world offers a specific selection of identity choices, closely associated with the status within its borders and socially constructed tactics related to their continuous negotiations. Consequently, the participants of the *world of homies* identify themselves as the *enemies of loseriness and the police*. The range of the social images created by them fits within the area of the continuum designated by two local model social identities: the identity of a *hard cookie* and the identity of a *loser*.

A *hard cookie* is the one who fights, enjoys respect, does not give in to the degradation tactics used by other people, both the *homies* and the others. Everyone in the hood is trying from an early age to build such self-presentations, which will allow them to develop their ‘local biography’ so as to be remembered as the one who was not a *loser*.

A *loser* is understood as the one who lacks the defensive competences used against the degradation aimed at him or her. I do not mean here the status as a social position in a relatively constant social structure (e.g. a group), but a position constantly and dynamically negotiated in everyday interactions. The degradation tactics reconstructed in the study take different forms, but the context of such interactions has a constant element - the audience. Its reaction (e.g. a burst of laughter, high fives with the winner, etc.) determines how a person is talked about after a particular event, which is the mechanism for consolidating his or her social identity in the world of *homies*. His or her biography is not saturated with stories protecting him or her from a low status in the world of *homies*, which condemns him or her to constant tension and readiness to construct such self-presentations that would contradict his or her social identification. The reference to the process of creating social identity in the world of *homies* lets us understand the behavior of children and adolescents, in the neighborhood, on the street, or at school. Consistent development of the self-image closer to a *hard cookie* ensures respect and loyalty of others, as well as a high status with the associated privileges. *Hard cookies* are covered, which means that others *stand behind them* in difficult situations (e.g. a local fight, defending the honor, etc.), have full access to important information and are not exposed to constant ritual insults⁵, etc. In contrast to the ‘strangers’, the *homies* in

⁴ *The hood* jest an ‘in vivo code’ - a concept borrowed directly from the language of the study participants. To signify the differences of the origin of the categories generated in the study, further *in vivo codes* will be marked in the text in *italics*.

⁵ More about ritual insults in: (Labov, 1972a; Labov, 1972b)

conflicts (e.g. a conflict with a neighbor, be it a *homie* or the 'strangers', a conflict with the supporters of a 'hostile' football club, etc.) use the mechanisms of informal social order.

The daily conduct of the 'strangers' in the place of residence expresses the understandings and interpretations typical of the dominant culture - the culture of the middle class. Hence, the 'strangers' seek the ways of resolving conflicts with the *homies* with the help of 'mediation' of institutions formally supporting the social order (e.g. intervention of local administration, calling the police, etc.).

In summary, the socially non-homogeneous neighborhood can be understood as communication space, whose foundation is the common territory inhabited by the 'unprivileged majority' and administratively and symbolically 'privileged minority', which provokes continuous disturbances in the communication between their representatives. In the case of the explored neighborhood, the differences in what the neighborhood means to the residents - concerning formal decisions and the cognitive perspective in terms of which they interpret the facts from the environment - catalyze durable communication disorders between the *homies* and the 'strangers'. The *homies* are the participants and usually also the sub-tenants, who in the interactions with the strangers' relate to the symbolic normative reference of the *world of homies*. The 'strangers' are non-participants and owners of the apartments in the neighborhood, who refer in their conduct to the mainstream society values. Conflicts are particularly manifested in the communication between the representatives of the young generation *in the hood* and the adult representatives of the 'strangers'.

This leads to a question about the relationship between social heterogeneity of the neighborhood and the stigmatization of the representatives of the selected groups of children and young people.

The diversified dynamics of the conflict-bearing interactions between the adolescent *homies* and the adult representatives of the 'strangers' (non-participants, owners) revealed certain analogies to the rules of the process of stigmatization described by E. Goffman (Goffman, 1979). This concept allows us to understand communication disturbances caused by assigning the interactional partner to an inadequate social category and the resultant formulation of the expectations towards him or her. When it turns out that the specific characteristics represented by an interactional partner differ from those of the category to which he or she was initially classified, his or her redefinition takes place. His or her image is reduced to negative traits - deviating from the original expectations- which determines the

perception of him or her as the other, and - as defined by Bokszański – ‘less desirable and in extreme cases even dangerous or evil’ (Bokszański 1989: 158). The world of ‘the stigmatized’ has a dualistic structure - people like him or her and the ‘normals’- those who recognize him or her as ‘the other’. The granting of a stigma to the interactional partner sentences him or her to dealing with it through two strategies - hostile bravado and defensive cowering (Goffman 1979: 5).

The communication in the neighborhood showed many analogies to the processes defined by Goffman. The lack of clear, formally defined rules of distribution of the material space of the neighborhood intensifies the informal tactics of negotiations used by different groups of residents. One of the groups actively changing the space is the **group of boys at the courtyard**. It is a group of several children from the neighborhood who are socially recognized as a separate entity, which has its spatial location (e.g. the *wally*, the gate, etc.), and are significant for one another in the process of social identity creation. This is the **primary reference group**. In the context of this group there begins the construction of a social identity and through the prism of it expectations are formulated towards an individual - initially only within the group, and further and beyond also among the out-of-the-neighborhood representatives of the world of *homies*⁶.

These groups become a crucial element of the interactive stage of the neighborhood when their participants reach the school age. This marks the beginning of the phase of their **dynamic exploration of the surroundings** and social negotiation of the neighborhood space between them, other neighborhood groups of the *homies* and the ‘strangers’. In this phase, groups are recognizing the territory as well as its potential for changes, which is connected with their dynamic mobility in the neighborhood. It is a period of experimentation with matter, both physical and interactive. The social reactions of the ‘strangers’ to the children gradually encircle the areas available to the minors or prohibited to them. Calling the police because of the first broken windows, quarrels with the kids or their parents who defend their rights are some examples of these negative reactions. The tactics applied to negotiate the space between the kids and the ‘strangers’ become a significant context for the construction of social identity within a group of boys at the courtyard. The young must show their courage, tenacity and consistency against the ‘strangers’ if they do not want to be defined as a *loser* by the *homies*.

⁶ As big part of the Łódź downtown consists of similar neighborhoods there is communication between their representatives who are for themselves out-of-the-neighborhood *homies*

Social presentations perceived by the 'strangers' as aggressive, bravado-related, or even 'pathological' enhance stigmatization. Young people from the neighborhood who do not fit into an image of a 'well-behaved child' arouse negative reactions of the 'strangers'. At first, they are boldly hostile and expose in a determined way their opposition to being given a stigma against people who mark them with it. This makes the stigmatizing communication even more dynamic. Fighting for a high status in their group of colleagues, and for a *good reputation* in relations with the other *homies*, they treat conflicts with the neighbors as a stage on which they play different roles highly rated by the *homies*. Their self-presentations are, however, perceived by the 'strangers' not as an identity work within their own courtyard group, but as an expression of social pathology. Hence, driving the children away, threatening their parents with financial consequences, and above all, police interventions become frequent 'arbitration' scenarios. As a result, they have contact with the police sooner and more frequently than in other residential environments, and over time they become socially recognized by its representatives. In the course of the intervention, they are easily fitted in the role of 'guilty', because of their language, gestures and the social stigma attributed to this place in the consciousness of the outsiders. In contrast, the self-presentation and arguments used by the 'strangers' from the neighborhood promote situational defining them as credible in contrast with the street kids or difficult youth, hence the 'innocent'⁷. Because these scenarios are constantly repeated, hostile bravado of the groups of kids is gradually replaced by defensive cowering, which gradually leads to the avoidance of interactions with the 'strangers'.

This process begins in early adolescence when a gradual shift to a sedentary phase takes time - searching for places for their own.

The decline of the interactive dynamics in this phase seems to be related to adolescents withdrawal as their response to elimination tactics formulated by the 'strangers'⁸. Young people hang out in hallways on the top floors of apartment houses, in the attics, or at the

⁷ This thesis finds its justification in social constructivism (Berger, Luckmann, 1983; Gergen, 1985). Alternative versions of the reality can be marginalized and subjected to strategies conducive to a 'just' change. On this basis, one can conclude that in every society we find groups referring to different cognitive perspectives, and the closer is the perspective of a given group to the dominant culture perspective, the greater will be its power.

⁸ In the interpretation of their withdrawal one may recall just psychological threads indicating a typical adolescent need for the isolation from the world of adults.

selected places in the yard, like walls, carpet beating stands, or someone's *cells*,⁹ etc. These acts, revealing de facto human strengths in the transformation of their environment, are seen by the 'strangers' as practices disturbing the peace and acts of vandalism, which results once again in the intensification of the elimination tactics.

The presence of the 'strangers' and their privileged position both in the administrative terms (decision-making within residential community) and in the symbolic dimension (representing the perspective coinciding with that of the formal control authorities: administration, police, school, etc.) gradually diminishes the physical spaces socially accessible to the neighborhood youth. Consequently, their activities are restricted to the gate area. The *gate* (namely, the contact area between the neighborhood and the street) is therefore not a choice, but a necessity. The limitation of their socially secure space to the area of a *gate* leading to the neighborhood from one of the outer streets – a 'no man's area' between the neighborhood and the outer world - is a consequence of the social exclusion from the courtyard. This small territory becomes the primary place of their day-to-day activity and a source of further problems associated with assigning them to the 'at-risk youth' category. Their behavior captivates the attention of the representatives of the world of the 'strangers', but this time those from outside of the neighborhood, for instance employees of local schools (teachers or school counselors¹⁰) passing the *gate* on their way to work, social workers visiting the area, probation officers¹¹, or police officers on preventive patrols. Since the *gate* area is very small, their interactions here are exaggerated, hyperbolized as they compensate

⁹ *Cell* is an in vivo code for a small storage room situated on the courtyard territory. There are several of them within a courtyard and they belong to selected residents

¹⁰ School counselors have been employed in Polish schools since the 1974 school year. The legal basis for their work is the Regulation issued by the Ministry of National Education, dated April 30th, 2013 on providing psychological and pedagogical aid in preschools, schools and agencies. Usually this position is occupied by persons with pedagogical or psychological background. According to § 23 of the above mentioned Regulation, school counselors have the following responsibilities: pupil assessment, monitoring the socio-educational activity of the school, providing psychological and pedagogical support to the teachers to meet the determined needs, addictions preventive measures, minimizing the effects of developmental disorders, therapy of behavioral disorders, providing various support for children and teachers in the psychological and pedagogical process and others.

¹¹ This is a public officer who performs legally defined educational, social rehabilitation (correctional), assessment, prevention and supervision tasks, related to the execution of court provisions. Such person begins his or her work with a family in the case when parental rights are restricted; for example when the parent's do not fulfill their parental obligations accordingly, when the child's welfare is endangered, when the guardianship court makes such a provision (Article 109 § 1 Family and Guardianship Code). Probation officers carry out their duties mainly in the family environment of the children, but they may also contact the school and other institutions the child attends.

for the limitations of this place. Their behavior, however, is not received by ordinary passers-by or the employees of the institutions mentioned above as a way of coping with social exclusion from the neighborhood, but as an expression of pathology. Its effect is a whole series of attempts to influence the boys to abandon the *gate*. In conversations with the employees of these institutions there appear quite consistent interpretations of the presence and behavior of the groups hanging out at the *gate* - interpretations identifying them as children from dysfunctional families whose educational failure and emotional disturbances in intrafamily relationships drove them to the street, where, uncontrolled by educational or social institutions, they are vulnerable to the progressive social maladjustment. Hence, the proposed solutions are not adequate to the needs of the youth groups. The examples include daily attendance to day care centers inadequate to their age as attended by the *younger ones*, return to the area of the courtyards, or becoming a client of the standard social work service (case work, etc). The symbolic and interactive insight into the everyday life of the groups of young people hanging out in the street at the *gate* revealed not only powerlessness, but also the paradox of the activities of the institutions that interpret the youth behavior problems in a typical way¹². Unaware of the real reason for youngsters hanging out at the *gate*, neither the school, nor the probation officers, nor the preventive police departments were able to propose interesting social service offer or extra-curriculum activities. Instead, they only deepened stigmatization and built an even thicker wall between the mainstream society and the *homies*.

Towards empowering social work with children and youth from the socially non-homogenous neighborhoods¹³

The perception of the mechanisms of the neighborhood effects in connection with the inequality of power in the neighborhood and its effect - stigmatization of the underprivileged -

¹² The 'traditional interpretations' cover these interpretations of social problems that are rooted in medical approaches, or psychodynamic ones or other theories relying on psychological explanations of social problems, as well as functionalist theories which tend to take for granted the present social order. (More in: Payne, 1997).

¹³ Since I have been working on the concept of empowerment of children and youth from socially non-homogeneous neighborhoods for a long time and it is constantly refined, some parts of the considerations about empowering social work in the neighborhood presented in this section were discussed in the following publications: (Gulczyńska, 2012; Gulczyńska, 2013; Gulczyńska, 2014).

pre-defines the nature of social work with children and youth from the socially non-homogeneous neighborhoods. It seems to be very consistent with the objectives of contemporary social work highlighted in the global definition of social work approved by the IFSW General Meeting and the IASSW General Assembly in July 2014 according to which 'social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing'. (<http://ifsw.org/policies/definition-of-social-work/>, access: 4-th of August, 2015)

The above definition, highlighting the social work impact on social change, emphasizes its progressive role and this is also the role of social work conceptualized by me as **empowering social work with children and youth in socially non-homogenous neighborhoods**.

The diagnosis of the explored neighborhood showed heterogeneity of the residential environment as a significant context of stigmatization and social exclusion of certain groups (here, groups of children and young people) of its residents. Therefore, the aim of social work - consistent with this diagnosis - is the **empowerment of the young residents of the neighborhood**, (or the representatives of other disadvantaged groups) in communication with the 'strangers' - both from within and from the outside of the neighborhood.

Given the interactive nature of the processes of their exclusion reconstructed herein, empowerment would mean work on communication between the parties representing the different 'worlds'.

Such work may comprise:

- creation of new interactive spaces conducive to learning about one another, which should open negotiations between parties representing different or even contradicting normative references (cognitive perspectives);

- streamlining the stigma-impaired communication between the privileged and the unprivileged residents in the neighborhood, especially communication between *guys at the gate* and the 'strangers'.

The social work in the socially non-homogenous neighborhood or in the above-mentioned institutions should focus on facilitation of mutual, reciprocal adaptation and should strive for sensitization and training in negotiations.

The empowering social work addressed to individuals could aim at a change in communication of a *homie* with the interlocutors from inside and the outside of the neighborhood - at school, at the police station, in the courts, etc.

Empowering actions can be addressed both to collective teams (natural groups of neighbors) and to individuals. An example of the former might be an attempt to unblock the communication between the *homies* and the 'strangers' in the process of social distribution of the 'common' territory in order to offset the impact of the non-participants and participants on planning the changes in this respect. I refer here to changes in the power relations between the unprivileged groups (children, youth, mothers with small children, etc.) and the privileged groups, whose representatives get into conflicts and fight for changes in the place of residence.

Since the stigma is a feature given in communication based on superficial knowledge of the other, the key task for social work seems to be emergence of the new communication spaces that will allow the parties to simply get to know one another. Such actions would be an opportunity to sensitize the privileged residents to the difficult situation of the unprivileged groups, and thus to bring them to understand the real reasons for their difficult behavior. The term '**bridging the worlds**' seems to embrace this intent in the fullest way. Bridging actions could be projects based on participation and joint activities for the neighborhood with attention paid to the priorities and objectives of all groups of inhabitants. An example could be a photography project carried out by the main actors of my research. Its artistic effects were planned to change their stigmatized image in the perception of the 'strangers'.

I could quote here multiple examples. Their common feature, however, would be encouragement to commence questioning of the 'taken for granted' definition of one another which demands deeper mutual knowledge of the perspectives of the conflicted parties and building something new, common and shared by them, beyond divisions.

In the case of the relationships disturbed in the long run by stigmatization, work on communication would require the introduction of **advocacy**¹⁴. Stressing the need for institutional independence of the advocates, I have in mind here not the ombudspersons, etc., but volunteer spokespersons of individuals, families, or courtyard groups - actors involved simultaneously in both worlds, representing the perspectives of minorities and undermining the taken for granted explanations, assessments and practices on the part of the 'strangers'.

¹⁴ More in Payne, 1997

Advocacy in the relations with neighbors particularly persistently fighting with the right of the children and young people to stay in courtyards, or advocacy in relations with the police determine the area of such work in the neighborhood itself. I also see a huge demand for the representation of the socially non-homogenous neighborhood minorities in the contact with the schools, local authorities or in the public discourse.

Conclusions

This article is an attempt both to address the need for scientific descriptions of the causal mechanisms of the neighborhood effects on its residents and to conceptualize the implications for social work logically consistent with the described mechanisms.

The theory constructed in the course of my qualitative and socially engaged research fits into the socio-interactive model as it conceptualizes the mechanisms of the neighborhood effects in terms of the social processes that occur within the neighborhood. In the case of my study, social communication and the impact exerted on it by different levels of power possessed by the local residents (formal and symbolic power) became a space enhancing the process of stigmatization. This process imprinted a negative mark on the further course of social careers of the participants of my research and other representatives of the unprivileged groups. The analysis of this process in the neighborhood and beyond it allows for the disclosure of the factors triggering stigmatization and nurturing its development.

Therefore, it opened the door for the preliminary outline of social work implications. Empowerment of the unprivileged groups, including in particular groups of children and young people from the neighborhood, became its main goal. The forms of its implementation – ‘bridging the worlds’ and social advocacy - initially determined the specific objectives and the role of a social worker. His or her area of expertise is expressed in mastering the methods of the ethnographic diagnosis of local communities, the street, etc., as well as having the competences crucial for the emergence of new communication spaces, such as participatory projects with the unprivileged or training them in negotiations to press ahead with their own perspectives. Primarily, however, he or she assumes the role of a spokesperson of the socially disadvantaged or excluded - the representatives of a discriminated minority in the neighborhood. He or she introduces their discourse not only to the interpretation of them by ‘the strangers’ (from the neighborhood, from outside of the neighborhood - employees of the institutions, passers-by, etc.), but also to the public and scientific discourse. In this way, empowering social work with children and youth from the socially non-homogeneous neighborhood can become a part of a promotional, deeply transformative and not adaptive,

'silencing' social work. I am sure we can find this need in other, socially similarly non-homogeneous neighborhoods, regardless of the national or geographic borders.

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