

**Monika Grochalska**

University of Warmia and Mazury, Poland

## **Threshold Events Generating Lifelong Learning - The Story of One Woman**

Sometimes the life story is the most adequate way to get unique data which allows us to investigate the structure of events, activities, phases of life from the point of view of a person who experienced them all. Therefore, the biographical research seems to be the best way to recognize subjective reflections, feelings, experiences and senses ascribed to concrete phenomenon, in this case - adult learning through experiencing a threshold events. Although, there is only few minutes for presentation, I'd like to focus on one only interview to briefly present all aspects of this issue (Flick, 2006).

At first I would like to introduce the interviewee. Let's say her name is Ann. She is easy going, silent and extremely pleasant 39 years old woman. She was born in a small village (500 villagers). She evaluates this place as extremely well-groomed, friendly for the villagers. There was a school, a post office, health care centre, club with the day-room and a shop. Her parents were an extraordinary pair – her mother was a teacher with higher education level and her father passed only seven years of primary school. They both were farming. Teaching was her mother's additional job. Their economic situation was average for those days.

Nowadays she lives in a big city and she is the principal of the day-nursery. She's got MA degree and a lot of additional courses and she is very proud about it. Her financial situation is really good. She lives with her husband and their two sons in their own flat. Moreover, they've got second flat and a parcel of land with summerhouse. They've got also two cars. Ann's last dream is to buy a house.

### **THE DIVERSITY OF LOCAL MARGINALIZATION AND EXCLUSION, SOCIAL INEQUALITIES, ACCESS TO RESOURCES AND THE POWER IN THE CONTEMPORARY COMMUNITIES IN TWO DIMENSIONS**

As a first aim I would like to focus on one form of local marginalization and exclusion, which concerns people born at the village. In Poland village is highly negatively labelling environment. Analysed qualitative data are taken from one of eight narrative interviews made for PhD dissertation titled: "Women and Men in Front of Change of Their Social Status in Biographical Perspective. Socioeducational Studies" in the year 2007. Interviewees were women and men, who stepped out of

their low social status inherited from their rural background (or, in other words, in social groups “exposed to risk”). These people experienced a vertical social mobility implied as a dramatic change in social status, from low status as a result of place of birth and a rural village environment with a large level of risk of staying in a low social status, to a high status characterized by gaining a higher education, and a high estimated income level and prestigious job position.

And a second dimension of social inequality I specially pay attention to, is concerned with “being a woman” and all what is socially ascribed to this status. Feminist theories assume that experiences and one's perception of these events are dependant on gender (Brannon, 2002). This presentation focuses on women's experiences which generate learning in early adulthood. The main aim is to show the structure of threshold events and their function during the course of a woman's life.

Specially hard is to be village girl or woman, when access to resources is highly restricted and life chances are really poor.

### **Low social status and educational/life chances**

School takes the role of selection mechanism, ascribing children to roles relevant to their origin and gender (and, of course, race, ethnicity, religion etc.) Kwieciński (2005) proved in his research, that children of parents with low level of alphabetization, from families with low cultural capital, meet at school with the same children, as they are and with other children: speaking the same way as the teacher, dressed better, treated better and obtaining better marks. Besides, school doesn't take up any attempt to interpret problems of the real world. It can't warn and help young people to avoid coming in cultural, social, professional and material poverty paths.

As it was proved in Mikut's research (2005), village school often contributes to „marginalization of the marginalized ones”. But even civic school often becomes a place of making separated classes in view of achieved results or place of living, also still being a place of labeling and stabilizing founds of social order. Also access to various forms of didactic and upbringing activities (except classes) is determined by two factors: place of living and results of learning. An access to these forms of education is allowed for natives, because they aren't dependent on school buses schedule. Moreover, various forms of extra activities are intended for the best pupils, with best notes. We can also see the differences, in view of youth's economic status. Chosen forms of cultural events (as theatre, cinema, journeys) are available only for the rich pupils. Youths from the poor families hardly ever take part in these expensive events.

Ann says about her education:

*“Maybe I had worse beginning because of that at the village nobody talks about how it would be. Parents didn't come with me. Nobody... Nobody told me that there are some exams. I had to do it all myself.”*

This way interviewee says about exams to the secondary school. She especially blames her parents. Children at the village have a low level of self-estimation. They do not believe that they can do many positive things in their lives. And usually no one can help them. Parents also don't believe in education. They rather want their children to get a good vocational skills and very concrete job in the future. Higher education seems to be something useless and wasting the time. Teachers often don't believe in possibilities of their pupils and don't prepare them to contemporary social life conditions.

It seems that educational mechanisms „freezing” children in certain social status are very strong. And there remains the role of adult education, which can help adults, who, for some reasons, finished their school education very early, on low level. Nowadays a one can continue education on optional level. Also, what was neglected at school in childhood and youth can be caught up in adulthood. An adult comes back to school, takes up the studies, not only because of circumstances forcing him/her to do it, but also he/she wants to cope with new events in his/her life and work and often wants to keep up running time, like Ann.

On the second level of educational choices, she failed her exam for medical studies.

*“Maybe it was merely my destiny, but in that moment nobody prompted me and I didn't think about it myself, that I could have appealed and get to the academy. However, I was upset and I removed all my documents and I came back home.”*

Ann's parents were inactive in front of educational choices of their own children. They looked after urgent, elementary needs. However, they didn't appreciate the need of self-development and achievements. Besides, they wanted to keep the children at the farm. Ann had only her brother's support and help in learning. Parents didn't interfere in her educational achievements and choices. They weren't able or they couldn't help:

*“They seemed to be inactive. But now I think I had no support. I wanted somebody to come with me, to explain everything... Simple – lack of support.”*

It was very influential for her further education. Ann felt lack of support in her effort of

achieving higher and higher levels of education. This situation caused grievance and other negative feelings:

- feeling of “wasted possibilities”,
- frustration,
- willing of “escape” from the village and from parents,
- low level of self-estimation.

That's why she was a kind of “rebel”. Even as a child she reacted against rules at home and at school:

*“In the third class I had my ears pierced. I did it secretly, my parents didn't know. I went to a old village common lady who pierced my ears with a needle. And I, a not-conscious, stupid, perhaps village girl, bought ear-rings from a stall. I put these rings into my ears. So, my Head Principle, who saw during a physics lesson that I had got something like this, ordered me to take them off immediately. So, for me it was a huge event as I was forced to take out my ear-rings anytime there was physics class and hide them.”*

### **Gender and special life conditions and choices**

Ann got marriage very early, during her studies. And she had also her first son very early. She had to manage with all issues - studying, upbringing the child, working. At the beginning she could count on her husband, but later he gone to work abroad and left her alone with all daily problems. She had to be self-supporting and she was. Moreover, she always wanted to be the best – successful mother, accomplished professional, financial achiever, supportive spouse. Feminologists usually call it “superwoman syndrome” (Ostrouch, 2005).

Besides, Ann is representative of the typically feminine way of thinking and feeling, even at work. The work she chose, is often described as typically feminine. The little nurselings have been the most important for her. She has been very sensitive and tearful in front of problems with this children. But she thinks, that this is necessary to be sympathetic, warm and tender in this kind of work.

### **LEARNING SPACES AGAINST EXCLUSION AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES**

The second aim is to show the trajectory of Ann's life through threshold events, which occurred in years of her early adulthood. These moments are related to life experiences with their real or potential educational function. They are placed in four dimensions (Demetrio, 2006): love (relationship and pleasure), play (escape and exploration), work (responsibility and practice), and death (end and suffering). In life each person collects experiences from these four “main issues” and learns how to know his/herself and others and how to learn from human and inter-human experience. The essential questions are: How and when do these threshold events cause the process of adult learning? What are the conditions and context of this process? What are the profits one can reach? What can adult learn this way? But this four areas may be threatened also as specific “learning spaces” with specific experiences, which may work against exclusion, because Ann came through a special trajectory: from economically, socially and culturally poor rural environment of her birth to her high social position in adulthood, from spaces of social exclusion (marginalization of village children) to social inclusion (activity in local community).

### **First dimension: love (relationship and pleasure)**

Love in Ann's life has been very important. She fell in love with her husband as a teenager and because of love she moved from her place of birth to the city they live now. Ann's bonds with her husband are very strong, however there are some disagreements and something like defiance. She admits herself:

*“... my husband's unwillingness for some issues was a motivation for me to take the action, to do something, to achieve something, in order not to stay put... and I think he drifted and winded me. He said “no” and I did “yes”.”*

Ann from the beginning loved her husband very much. She loved him and in many important issues she was ready to addict for the good of the relationship. But in less important issues she was able to have her own way. Just then the resistance of her husband was a motive power for her activity, especially in case of her own development, education, financial situation and also her look. For example, when he doesn't want her to do next training, she makes it or when he doesn't agree for a new hairstyle, she makes it.

Ann's husband is less active and he doesn't like radical solutions and rapid decisions. Ann – just the opposite. That's why they argue a lot, but without any negative influence for their

relationship.

### **Second dimension: play (escape and exploration)**

Ann enjoys travelling. She loves to collect new experiences and learns a lot from her trips. Unfortunately, her husband doesn't take part in her travels because of his health. Her journeys are both exploration and escape. Escape from daily routines and problems. Usually a trip is the time for her to relax and think about next step in her life.

She has a lot of friends and treasures a friendship very much. She thinks that friendship is worth cherishing like family and love. She can't live without friends. Very often she is tired of scrimings, noises, the children and home, but for a moment her stress is going down and she feels lack of other people. She wants to sit down and talk with somebody or to drink coffee, and in fact she always has someone nearby – some friends, that she can call and meet. She is very open person, she never stays closed at home. Other people are very important in her life. From her friends she usually expects some advice, help, objective valuation of her behaviours and activities. Her decisions are based on friends' opinions.

### **Third dimension: work (responsibility and practice)**

For Ann work is tantamount to responsibility for her nurselings – young children which need her tender care. That why she treats her work very seriously and never despise her duties.

Because of her engagement, she won a competition and became the principle of the day-nursery. Now she does, what she likes the most and she does all for kids. She hires only good, tender and professional nursemaids /form-mistresses. She interviews all potential workers herself.

*„Some people think, that work ends on coming and leaving the place after eight hours. And it's very rare to meet someone, who wants to spend his/her free time, for example weekend, to take part in some trainings or courses, to do something additional.”*

Ann is responsible and reliable at work. She still improves her qualifications. Besides, she's creative, often improves the rules of working with kids, makes something new. She has got great contacts with parents of the children. They find it as very important feature. It makes her activity more useful for all “clients” of her institution.

#### **Fourth dimension: death (end and suffering)**

One of the worst moments in Ann's life was the tragic death of her beloved brother. She says about it:

*“This was a kind of break in my biography, when... perhaps I didn't fight against myself but a world, life lost for me its sense... During all this year I was plunged into mourning as I couldn't imagine that at that time I was able to wear something different (...) Then, I tried not to get back to my occupations, to anything and my life had no sense at all. I wasn't able to stand on my legs as memories were getting back all the time... But, at one moment I said to myself that I can't stand like this but I have to do something with me. Practically, I started to look at the world differently as well as on life, passing by. Maybe, I was closer to God (...) I go there, [to church - author's reminder] to pray, to become quieter and not to allow myself to become too pride but to be myself and be possible, at one moment to stop...”*

This way, through reflection, she has changed her life. She has learnt also how to cope with the heavy loss.

So, this four areas may be threatened as a specific “learning spaces”. In Ann's biography this spaces have a very concrete meaning. She is a person, who is able to learn a lot from this events and to use them for further development.

As Demetrio (2006) says, there are also three dimensions of education in adult life. Ann participates them all: she takes part in various organized forms of education and training, appreciates the role of philosophical and religious contents in life and learn by experiencing extreme situations in life, which specially force her to auto-reflection, like the death of her brother. And she's got the need of changes in her life. However this is the most influential adult learning determinant, either in short and long term perspective.

#### **THE LOCALITY**

My interviewee's biography is the best example for the fact, that the “locality” of a contemporary woman is more often tied to her identity along with various forms of social integration in which she participates. Socially created locality is surely a result of learning processes (in which

are involved both individuals and/or groups) including the processes of understanding the local space. The locality is a result of active participation and meaning creation in every day activities.

The third aim of this paper is to present high level of activity in local environment, which can be both effect and stimulator of learning in adult life. "Sense of locality" is very important element in a processes of learning and in self-development.

Beside her work, Ann helps in therapeutic support centres in the city and in care and educational aid centres. She helps also in Young Children's Home and she is always open for parents of her nurselings. She organizes weekend family trips for parents and children to the forest for family bonfire and roasted sausages.

She makes some trainings and initiates new programmes in her day-nursery, especially ecological. She encourages her workers to take a part in this trainings and programmes. Ann also cooperates with various institutions, like Centre for Ecological Education or Community Fund of Environment Protection. She wants to make ecological institution. Her children know a lot about ecology and they know how to live ecological way, despite they are very young. They are able even to sort the rubbish. This is very satisfying for Ann. Her efforts for the local community have been recognized – in year 2000 she was awarded by the president of the city for entirety of her work and social activity in aid of young citizens.

Doubtless Ann presents high level of activity in local community, which is an effect and stimulator of her learning. She does some new trainings to make her work better and works better because of new trainings and courses she takes part in. Her "sense of locality" and strong identification with local community is very important element in a processes of learning and in her self-development.

Concluding, locality is still important, even in contemporary global world. Sense of affiliation to the local community and active participation in local projects gives a sense of security, allows for the self-realization and for creating a rich personality and integrated identity. Exemplifying, Ann's activity for the local community was mainly the result of her social background, her educational path and specially of threshold events in her life. Because her life wasn't easy, she wants to help other people. She is sensitive and sympathetic. An activity in/for local community generates processes of learning, which motivate Ann to further education in order to use her possibilities better and better in her local community. Ann's biography example shows us something like "double helix" of combined individual and local community development, which could be the sign of attitude, which seems to be worth promoting.

## References

- Brannon Linda (2002). *Psychologia rodzaju. Kobiety i mężczyźni: podobni czy różni*. Gdańsk: GWP.
- Demetrio Duccio (2006). Edukacja dorosłych. In Bogusław Śliwerski (Eds.), *Pedagogika* (Vol.3). Gdańsk: GWP.
- Flick Uwe (2006). *An introduction to qualitative research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). London-Thousand Oaks-New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Kwieciński Zbigniew (2000). *Tropy – ślady – próby. Studia i szkice z pedagogii pogranicza*. Poznań – Olsztyn: Wyd. Edytor.
- Kwieciński Zbigniew (2005). Szkoła a wykluczanie. In Krystyna Marzec-Holka (Eds.), *Marginalizacja w problematyce pedagogiki społecznej i praktyce pracy socjalnej*. Bydgoszcz: Wyd. Akademii Bydgoskiej im. Kazimierza Wielkiego.
- Mikut Małgorzata (2005). Marginalizacja zmarginalizowanych w gimnazjum wiejskim (komunikat z badań). In Marzec-Holka Krystyna (Eds.), *Marginalizacja w problematyce pedagogiki społecznej i praktyce pracy socjalnej*. Bydgoszcz: Wyd. Akademii Bydgoskiej im. Kazimierza Wielkiego.
- Ostrouch Joanna (2005). (Nie)Zharmonizowane światy. Paradoxy funkcjonowania kobiet. In Alicja Kicowska, Zbigniew Kwieciński Z. (Eds.), *Dzielność i troska. Studia zadedykowane Profesor Malewskiej Eugenii*, Olsztyn: Wyd. UWM.