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SOCIAL CONFLICTS IN THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE: CHANGES IN POPULAR BELIEFS OVER TIME

Beliefs about the potential for conflicts over issues of social inequality are a part of social consciousness. At the dawn of the new socio-economic system it is particularly important to study these beliefs in a dynamic framework. During the initial phase of the post-communist transformation citizens observe both positive and negative aspects of their developing democracy and market economy. For example, people not only perceive how political parties advertise their programs and compete in electoral process but people also get a sense about political corruption. They enjoy an ample supply of goods in stores but also are confronted with unemployment and see homeless children on the streets. Such perceptions of both positive and negative aspects of systemic transformation may lead to new popular images of social structure. Research on mass-level social consciousness concerning the perceived social inequality and attitudes toward conflicts during 1988–1993 allows us to reconstruct psychological reactions to radical social change.

The purpose of this chapter is to answer the following questions: (1) Did the sense of conflict generated by basic social divisions change in comparison to the sense of conflict existing in the late stage of state socialism? (2) If so, what are the directions and the patterns of this change? (3) To what extent do social-stratification position and political experience explain the shifts in attitudes toward social divisions and social conflicts? The main issues of this chapter, therefore, pertain to the “awareness of

conflicts." This concept was introduced into Polish sociology in the 1960s (Wesolowski 1966) and it was used for studying class structure and the theory of group interests (Adamski 1998, 1993). As seen from a theoretical perspective, most problems involving awareness of social conflicts pertain to the public's legitimization of the political order. Since the 1960s, the realization of conflicts in the social structure constitutes an important part of empirical studies of psychological functioning (Nowak 1969, 1989; Slomczynski and Wesolowski 1973; Koralewicz 1987; Domanski 1987; Adamski 1986, 1989, 1990; Janicka 1987, 1993) and of mental adjustment to radical social change (Adamski 1993; see also Slomczynski et al. 1999).

Subjective Conflict Potentiality: Basic Results

The data from the 1988–1993 panel survey constitute an empirical basis for the analysis presented in this chapter. Popular opinions on social conflicts are examined by utilizing the following questionnaire item: *In all countries there appear differences and conflicts among various groups of the population. I will name various groups of people and then ask you to tell me whether the conflicts between these groups are very strong, strong, rather weak, or are there no conflicts at all?* For the sake of over-time comparability, in this chapter I discuss only those dimensions of the conflict potentiality that are shared by both surveys, 1988 and 1993. These dimensions correspond to the following social divisions: rich versus poor, non-manual versus manual workers, supervisors (managers) versus supervisees (employees), and rulers (authority) versus ruled (society). One can argue that social differentiation in wealth, nature of work, position in the organization of work, and access to power define the main dimensions of class position. Therefore, a construct expressing a complex assessment of the potential for basic social conflicts is actually a measure of conflict potentiality of class structure (Wesolowski 1974).

Each respondent's opinion on the intensity of social conflicts between groups in a given dimension is measured on a four-point scale, from 1 (denoting the minimal level) to 4 (denoting the maximal level). Table 4.1 provides rudimentary information on a subjective conflict potentiality. In 1993 the conflicts between the poor and the rich and between the rulers and the ruled were perceived by a significantly larger proportion of people than in 1988. In 1993, 60.0% of respondents expressed opinions that wealth was producing strong or very strong conflicts – a rise of 16.5% as compared to 1988. Perception of a conflict potentiality of power rose even more. In 1988, 60.0% of respondents expressed opinions that power produced strong or

very strong conflicts and this figure rose to 80.4% in 1993. The frequency of assessment of conflicts due to the differences in the nature of work and to the division of people into supervisors and supervisees is similar in both studies: about one third of the respondents perceive these conflicts as strong or very strong. A relatively less frequent assessment of conflicts due to the

Table 4.1. Perception of Conflicts in the Social Structure, 1988 and 1993

Social division	Percent of positive responses ^a	Mean value	Standard deviation
A. Perception of conflicts in 1988			
Wealth: rich versus poor	43.5	2.43	0.81
Job desirability: nonmanual versus manual workers	32.6	2.27	0.78
Authority: supervisors (managers) – supervisees (employees)	37.0	2.34	0.79
Power: rulers (elite) – ruled (society)	60.0	2.86	0.84
B. Perception of conflicts in 1993			
Wealth: rich versus poor	60.0	2.71	0.82
Job desirability: nonmanual versus manual workers	35.3	2.30	0.78
Authority: supervisors (managers) – supervisees (employees)	39.3	2.42	0.78
Power: rulers (elite) – ruled (society)	81.4	3.21	0.73
C. Difference 1993–1988			
Wealth: rich versus poor	16.5 ^c	0.28 ^d	0.01
Job desirability: nonmanual versus manual workers	2.7	0.03 ^e	0.00
Authority: supervisors (managers) – supervisees (employees)	2.3	0.08 ^f	-0.01
Power: rulers (elite) – ruled (society)	21.4 ^c	0.35 ^g	-0.11 ^h

^a Question: *Tell me whether the conflicts between these groups are very strong, strong, rather weak, or there are no conflicts at all.* Combined answers: *very strong and strong conflicts.*

^b Assessment of conflicts: *very strong* (4), *strong* (3), *rather weak* (2), and *there are no conflicts at all* (1).

^c Proportion difference significant at $p < 0.05$.

^d Mean difference significant at $p < 0.001$, t -test value = 12.98.

^e Mean difference non-significant at $p < 0.05$, t -test value = 1.43.

^f Mean difference significant at $p < 0.01$, t -test value = 3.77.

^g Mean difference significant at $p < 0.001$, t -test value = 18.26.

^h The only significant ($p < 0.05$) over time difference between standard deviations.

differences in the nature of work and to the division of people into supervisors and supervisees can be, at least to some extent, explained by their functional role in the work organization.

The increase in mean value of conflict potentiality between the power elite and the rest of the society is surprising. Since it occurred during the replacement of the authoritarian system by the democratic one, it might be a result of the rise in people's expectations from the institutions of power and from people's observations of poor performance by the political elite. It is also possible that in the future as democratic rule sets in, trust in the power elite and the efficacy of its actions will become important.

The fact that in 1993 60.0% of respondents perceived conflicts in the dimension of wealth probably results from a negative evaluation of the distributive system. Public opinion polls indicate that large income inequality accompanying the systemic transformation is commonly rejected.¹

A perception of conflicts caused by wealth and power, which rose in 1993 as compared to 1988, might explain various changes in orientation and political behavior. It is worthwhile to note that Polish society never fully approved of the liberal principle of free articulation of strong discords and a straightforward play of dissenting interests, as evidenced by both the style of public discourse and voting preferences. During the initial period of the post-communist transition, rising income inequality and disagreements within elites affected the perception of conflicts and subsequently there was a withdrawal of popular support for radical reforms (Kolarska-Bobinska 1994).

Subjective Conflict Potentiality: A Synthetic Approach

Generally, those who see more acute conflicts related to one social division tend to see the same with respect to other divisions. For both periods, the correlation between conflicts related to nature of work (non-manual-manual workers) and authority (supervisors-supervisees) is the highest ($0.480 \leq r \leq 0.489$) and the correlation between the nature of work and power is the lowest ($0.252 \leq r \leq 0.294$). Generally, the pattern of the correlations for both periods is very similar, although the strength of the relationships is systematically lower for 1993 than for 1988. The largest over-time difference concerns the correlation between supervision and power: the correlation for 1988 was relatively high ($r = 0.405$) and for 1993 it is relatively low ($r = 0.297$).

¹ See Kolarska-Bobinska (1994) and the next chapter in this volume.

Table 4.2. Relationships Among the Questionnaire's Items Pertaining to Social Conflicts, 1988 and 1993

Items	Rich versus poor	Nonmanual versus manual workers	Supervisors versus supervisees	Rulers versus ruled
Correlations ^a				
A. Perception of conflicts in 1988				
Rich versus poor	1.000	0.452	0.355	0.349
Nonmanual versus manual workers		1.000	0.489	0.294
Supervisors versus supervisees			1.000	0.405
Rulers versus ruled				1.000
B. Perception of conflicts in 1993				
Rich versus poor	1.000	0.440	0.314	0.302
Nonmanual versus manual workers		1.000	0.480	0.252
Supervisors versus supervisees			1.000	0.297
Rulers versus ruled				1.000

^a All coefficients significant, $p < 0.05$

This analysis indicates that there occurred a split in the conflicting functions of two dimensions of social structure: organizational position and political power. Thus, the perception of structural phenomena does not evolve as a petrified emotional reaction or as stereotypical thinking. Strict dependence of organizational structures on political power used to be one of the characteristics of the praxis in the socialist system. The depoliticization of the economy was one of the main goals of the systemic transformation. Political scientists and economists still differ in their assessments of the level of institutional independence that the economy has achieved so far. The data presented here clearly demonstrate that these two stratification orders, organizational authority and political power, already became quite independent of each other in the social consciousness during the initial phase of systemic transformation.

Correlations between the basic dimensions of conflict potentiality of each of the four social divisions define the intrinsic structure of the common construct. The factor loadings resulting from the principal component analysis, presented in Table 4.3, are relatively high. They reveal that the general sense of conflict potentiality is stable over time. The construct explains more than fifty percent of variance, with eigenvalues above two. It

is worthwhile to note that for both periods, 1988 and 1993, the factor loadings do not significantly change.

Table 4.3. Factor Loadings for Questionnaire's Items Pertaining to Social Conflicts, 1988 and 1993

Questionnaire's Items	Data for 1988 ^a	Data for 1993 ^b
	Factor loadings	
Rich versus poor	0.532	0.552
Nonmanual versus manual workers	0.593	0.615
Supervisors versus supervisees	0.597	0.552
Rulers versus ruled	0.455	0.365

^a Eigenvalue = 2.177; percent of variance = 54.4

^b Eigenvalue = 2.053; percent of variance = 51.3

The dynamics of the realization of social conflicts is characterized by a correlation between the 1988 and the 1993 scales of perception of conflict potentiality, defined in the same way for both years. A low correlation ($r = 0.139$) indicates a pivotal change. Considering quartile intervals on this scale, one can notice that over two-thirds of respondents changed their location in the overall distribution. Using a common metric for both 1988 and 1993, we can see that, overall, the increase in intensity of perceiving social conflicts is statistically significant. LISREL modeling also confirms this conclusion.²

An Explanatory Model

The panel study, aimed at measuring the same variables again some time later, allows one to analyze the conditioning mechanism of the realization of structural conflicts in a dynamic way. In particular, we can account for a change in the dependent variable, treating the 1988 scale of perceived social conflicts as a lagged variable. In the proposed model in Table 4.4 the effect of demographic, social stratification, and political experience variables on the 1993 scale of perceived social conflicts is presented in a net form, controlling for an earlier perception. As one would expect, the 1993 scale is predominantly influenced by its lagged variable.

² The two-population model reveals that the mean value in 1993 is significantly larger than the mean value in 1988 at $p < 0.05$.

Table 4.4. Regression of the 1993 Scale of Perceived Social Conflicts on Social Stratification and Political Experience, Controlling for Basic Demographic Variables and the 1988 Scale of Perceived Social Conflict

Independent Variables	Regression coefficients		
	B	Standard error	Beta
<i>Lagged variable</i>			
Scale of perceived social conflict, 1988	0.133	0.032	0.133
<i>Demographic variables</i>			
Gender (male = 1)	-0.243	0.067	-0.123
Age (years)	0.001	0.003	0.013
Urban/rural (urban = 1)	-0.208	0.078	-0.094
<i>Social stratification variables</i>			
Education ^a	0.008	0.015	0.021
Occupation ^b	0.139	0.084	0.056
Income ^c	-0.102	0.058	-0.069
<i>Political experience</i>			
Communist party membership (yes = 1)	-0.001	0.084	-0.001
Voting behavior ^d	0.199	0.081	0.081
Constant	0.857	0.377	
Adjusted R ²			0.055

^a Years of schooling

^b Jobs requiring low level of qualifications = 1, otherwise = 0

^c Per capita household income (ln)

^d Declared absenteeism from future participation in elections = 1, otherwise = 0.

Demographic variables include gender, age, and urban/rural division. Earlier studies demonstrate that in spite of discrimination against women on the job market, their view of many social and political issues is no different than that of men (Domanski 1992; Titkow and Domanski 1995). However, our analysis shows that gender is one factor that forms the perception of social structure, independently from other factors. In particular, women are more aware of conflicts within the social structure and they perceive social divisions more acutely. It seems that when, in addition to the old discrimination patterns, some new limitations evolve – like a restricted accessibility to the organized child-care system and meager prospects for finding jobs – women develop a perception of intense social conflicts.

Although older persons tend to see social conflicts more intensely than younger persons, the net effect of age is not statistically significant. However, people from the countryside differ from people in cities with respect to their common perception of social conflicts. Among those living in rural areas the realization of conflicts is particularly sharp.

The model presented in Table 4.4 contains three stratification variables: education, occupation, and income. Education, measured by years of schooling, has no significant impact on the 1993 perception of social conflicts. This may be a result of the measurement of the competing variable – that of occupation. In this analysis, initially I tried three scales of occupational status: socio-economic, job complexity, and prestige. None of these scales exercised a significant impact on the dependent variable. However, a scale of qualification requirements has proved to be useful. Eventually, I used the dichotomy of unskilled manual and non-manual workers on the one hand and the rest of the qualified labor force on the other. Those without skills perceive social conflicts with particular intensity. The impact of this variable is relatively large and statistically significant. I also observed that a decrease in family per capita income is associated with an increase on the 1993 scale of perceived social conflicts. Thus, the following is the general conclusion about the social stratification variables: *controlling for education, people working in jobs requiring little skills and having low incomes perceive social conflicts in a more intense manner than people working in jobs requiring a lot of skills and having high incomes.*

The model also includes two variables related to political experience: communist party membership and voting behavior. We should note that one aim of communist ideology was the blurring social conflicts within East European societies. Thus, one could assume that the legacy of this ideology might be present particularly among the members of the former Polish United Workers' Party. Indeed, the effect of membership in this party is negative, but very small and statistically insignificant.

In the 1993 questionnaire there is an item regarding future voting in parliamentary elections. I use this item as a dichotomous variable, distinguishing those who intended not to vote in the future election from the rest. Declared absenteeism from voting seems to indicate political alienation and may influence the perception of social conflicts. Those who do not intend to vote perceive social conflicts more intensely than those who intend to vote. The impact of this political variable is strong and statistically significant.

Conclusion

My analyses reveal that during the initial phase of the post-communist transition, the most significant change in the perception of social conflicts related to *wealth* (rich versus poor) and *power* (rulers versus ruled). The realization of conflicts pertaining to the nature of work (non-manual versus

manual workers) and *organizational position* (supervisors versus supervisees) did not change very much between 1988 and 1993. Overall, in 1993 people perceived conflicts more intensely than in 1988.

Some studies suggest that the basic pattern of the common perception of social divisions was not developed during the post-1989 transition but some years earlier, at the beginning of the 1980s, as an effect of the processes that triggered the formation of *Solidarity* and the introduction of martial law (for review, see Slomczynski, Janicka, and Wesolowski 1994). At the time of *Solidarity's* formation there had already occurred a steep rise in the common perception of power relations as a source of conflicts, manifested in the everyday language by continuous references to "them versus us." In addition, at the beginning of the post-1989 transition, opinions about income as a source of conflict became common nationwide. "Them versus us" started to refer not only to political but also to economic division.

The 1993 scale of the perception of social conflicts is weakly determined by the analogous scale for 1988. Thus, potentially, there is a lot of variance to be explained by other variables. Only a few, however, have a significant impact on the overall realization of social conflicts. Women and those living in countryside present relatively strong views about social conflicts. Moreover, people working in jobs requiring little skills and having low incomes perceive social conflicts in a more intense manner than people working in jobs requiring a lot of skills and having high incomes. In addition, declared absenteeism from electoral voting has significant effect on the 1993 scale of the perception of social conflicts.

Some studies, conducted in the mid-1980s, showed that personal characteristics of individuals, including beliefs and values, were more frequently seen as a reason for social conflicts than occupation, education, or income (Koralewicz and Wnuk-Lipinski 1987; Janicka 1987). This perception might change. It is likely that co-existence of elements of the old and the new social orders and an increased complexity of social relations during the initial phase of systemic transformation enhance the production of conflicting interests. These, in turn, cause individuals to redefine the situation and to adjust their attitudes toward the actual situation. Thus, a psychological mechanism intended to explain a response to conditions of radical social change (cf. Slomczynski et al. 1999; Wnuk-Lipinski 1996; and Zaborowski 1995) should take the perception of social conflict into account.