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DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL CONFLICT PERCEPTION: DIMENSIONS AND RELATIONS

The popular perception of social conflicts results from the objective interests of groups and individuals differently located in the social structure and from people's evaluation of the existing social relations with respect to their embedded interpersonal and inter-group strains and animosities. Changes in the common perception of social conflicts that occur over a long time are good indicators of adapting social processes. Subjective definitions of conflictogenic situations affect the orientations that build into an overall acceptance or contestation of an existing social order (Janicka and Wesolowski 1997; 2000).

The aim of this chapter is to present the popular perception of the main social conflicts in 1998 and the changes that occurred during two phases of Poland's post-communist transition, 1988–1993 and 1993–1998. Are there significant changes in the perception of social structure and conflicts produced by social divisions in the spheres of wealth, nature of work, organizational authority, and political power? To answer this question I present new data for 1998 and rely on the earlier data from my previous publication (Janicka 2000).

Although I limit my analysis to the traditional dimensions of social stratification, it is worth mentioning that, as a result of the systemic transformation, new areas of social conflicts have evolved, particularly in the

context of ongoing privatization, regional differentiation, joblessness, and pauperization (Malikowski and Serega 2000). However, empirical studies demonstrate that, despite all of the evolution in social structure, the traditional social stratification continues to be the main axis of the structuralization of Polish society (Domanski 2000).

Perceived Social Conflicts

In our analysis, the *perceived intensity of social conflicts* is a construct inferred from responses to a block of questions with precategorized answers. We asked the respondents to assess the intensity of conflicts generated by the fact that people differ with respect to their wealth, nature of work, position in the organization of work, and access to power. In each of three waves of the panel study the questions were identically formulated: *In all countries there appear differences and conflicts among various groups of the population. I will name certain groups of people and then ask you to tell me whether the conflicts between these are very strong, strong, rather weak, or there are no conflicts at all.* Respondents' answers were expressed on a four-point scale, from 1 (denoting the minimal level of conflict) to 4 (denoting the maximal level of conflict). In this chapter I focus on conflicts associated with four social divisions: rich versus poor; nonmanual versus manual workers; supervisors (managers) versus supervisees (employees); and rulers (authority) versus ruled (the rest of the society).

Three distributional characteristics of the popular perception of conflicts are worth considering: (1) awareness of a given conflict measured by the percent of persons giving a positive answer to the question about the conflict, (2) the intensity of perceived conflicts measured by the mean value of scores, and (3) the variation of opinions measured by the standard deviation of scores. The data presented in Table 13.1 provide basic information on the distribution of the perceived conflicts in 1998 and the direction of changes that occurred between 1988 and 1998.

The major changes in perceived conflicts during the initial phase of post-communist transition in Poland are described in detail in another study (Janicka 2000). We must note here that, in 1988, the greatest intensity of perceived conflict was seen in the rulers versus ruled category (60.0 percent, and a mean value 2.86) and the least intensity – in the nonmanual versus manual category (32.6 percent, and a mean value 2.27). In 1988–1993, the increase in the intensity of perceived conflict exceeded 15 percent in two social divisions: rich versus poor and rulers versus ruled. In

the case of job desirability and authority the increase was negligible (less than 3 percent).

Table 13.1. Perception of Conflicts in the Social Structure in 1998 and the Changes in This Perception in 1988–1998 and 1993–1998

Social divisions	Percent of positive responses	Mean value	Standard deviation
A. Perception of conflicts in 1998			
Wealth: rich versus poor	68.7	2.85	0.77
Job desirability: nonmanual versus manual workers	40.3	2.44	0.72
Authority: supervisors (managers) versus supervisees (employees)	47.5	2.54	0.73
Power: rulers (elite) versus ruled (society)	70.0	2.94	0.75
B. Difference in perception, 1988–1998			
Wealth: rich versus poor	25.2	0.42	-0.04
Job desirability: nonmanual versus manual workers	7.7	0.17	-0.06
Authority: supervisors (managers) versus supervisees (employees)	10.5	0.20	-0.06
Power: rulers (elite) versus ruled (society)	10.0	0.08	-0.09
C. Difference in perception, 1993–1998			
Wealth: rich versus poor	8.7	0.14	-0.05
Job desirability: nonmanual versus manual workers	7.7	0.14	-0.06
Authority: supervisors (managers) versus supervisees (employees)	8.2	0.12	-0.05
Power: rulers (elite) versus ruled (society)	-11.4	-0.27	0.02

In the advanced phase of post-communist transition in Poland, the proportion of people convinced that wealth, the nature of work, and the organizational authority position produce strong or very strong conflicts is on the rise. From 1993 to 1998 this proportion increased about 8 percent in each of these three categories. However, in the same period, in the case of the

division of people into rulers and the rest of society, the proportion of people providing positive answers about the existence of conflicts decreased by 11.4 percent. Nonetheless, the division of power and the division of wealth are still the two most important social divisions associated with the perception of strong conflicts in society. In 1998, the numbers of respondents naming each of these divisions as conflictogenic were almost the same (68.7 percent and 70.0 percent, respectively).

In both phases of the post-communist transition, the belief was increasing that differentiation with respect to the nature of work and organizational authority causes strong tensions among people. In a free economy, the market potential of job credentials, education, and occupational position becomes an increasingly dominant factor in deciding about the individual's life chances and prospects of success (Slomczynski, Janicka, Mach, and Zaborowski 1999; Zaborowski, Slomczynski, Mach, and Palska 2000). This may explain why people perceive conflicts among groups differentiated by their nature of work and job position – that is, based on the system of occupational hierarchies – more acutely in the advanced phase of systemic change. It points to their perception of the effects of systemic transformation and their realistic assessments of their place in the social structure.

Changes in people's perception of political power (rulers versus ruled) differ in two subsequent phases of the transformation. Political divisions, seen as the main source of social conflicts under communism, increased in importance in the initial phase of the transformation and started to lose their importance only after 1993. Surprisingly, in the initial phase of the systemic transformation – despite the restored legitimization of political institutions and the consolidation process of power elites – people's feelings about conflicts generated by the division of society into rulers and the rest of the population did not decrease. It is likely that social costs that had to be paid in the first years of systemic transformation were high enough to block the positive effects of the newly gained legitimization of political power, law and order, and democracy. Negative feelings about the conflicting role of the division into “us” versus “them” eased only by the end of the second phase of systemic transformation (see also Kwasniewicz 2000).

Opinions on social conflicts result only in part from the effects of systemic transformation; they are also shaped by political legacy. Egalitarian orientation, which is quite common in Polish society (Zaborowski 1995), constitutes an important part of this legacy and may influence people's understanding and evaluation of social conflicts. Deep internalization of standards of equality and sensitivity to issues of social justice slow down the process of accepting the free market mechanism of allocating occupational

roles and the accumulation of goods. Egalitarian mentality may help to explain why economic differentiation is commonly seen as the most important source of conflicts in Polish society.

The percentage of people providing positive answers about the existence of conflicts, as well as the mean values of the scores of answers to the question about these conflicts, are important characteristics of the intensity of beliefs in this domain. The standard deviation values provide information about the variation of the opinions. Generally, the differences of these values across all items in a given year are relatively small. This indicates that each dimension of conflict has a similar pattern of distribution with respect to total variability. Moreover, the variability does not increase in time in any significant way.

Cohesion in the Perceptions of Social Conflicts

Which sources of conflicts are commonly perceived in a similar way with respect to their intensity, and which in a different way? The correlation coefficients presented in Table 13.2 provide information about the degree of congruence in the perception of various structural conflicts. They show that social divisions occurring in different phases of social transformation have been, in general, very similarly assessed. The perception of social conflicts was most cohesive in 1993, at the very end of the first phase of the transformation. Five years later, when the consequences of various reforms became better known and assessed, perceptions on the intensity of conflicts resulting from various structural sources became slightly more disparate.

Table 13.2. Correlation Between Different Types of Social Conflicts, 1998

Types of conflict	Nonmanual			
	Rich versus poor	versus manual workers	Supervisors versus supervisees	Rulers versus ruled
	correlations			
Rich versus poor	1.000	0.410	0.308	0.288
Nonmanual versus manual workers		1.000	0.527	0.261
Supervisors versus supervisees			1.000	0.280
Rulers versus ruled				1.000

In relative terms, the perceptions of conflicts associated with the nature of work (the division into nonmanual work and manual work) and

organizational authority (the division into supervisors and supervisees) are the most cohesive. The degree of cohesion in perceptions about conflicts stemming from these two sources increased more in the second phase of the transformation as compared with the first one. The correlation coefficients for all three years, 1988, 1993, and 1998 are: 0.480, 0.489, 0.527, respectively. These correlations can be contrasted with those indicating the least cohesion, which appear between perceptions of conflicts associated with the nature of work and the division into rulers and the rest of the society – the relevant coefficients were: 0.294, 0.252, and 0.261. They are the lowest in respective years.

Over the past ten years, the perceptions of conflicts associated with organizational authority and political power became significantly less cohesive. In 1988, just before the systemic transformation occurred, perceptions of conflicts stemming from these two sources were quite highly correlated ($r = 0.405$), while by the end of the first phase of the transformation, in 1993, their correlation decreased to 0.297, being still weaker in 1998 ($r = 0.280$). This decreasing correlation indicates that organizational authority is commonly perceived as being more and more distinct from political power.

The Global Perception of Social Conflicts

Similarly to the previous study (Janicka 2000), for the 1998 data I have conducted principal component analysis of the global perception of social conflicts. The analysis shows high factor loadings: 0.485 for rich versus poor, 0.639 for nonmanual versus manual workers, 0.579 for supervisors versus supervisees, and 0.349 for rulers versus ruled. The common factor explains over 50 percent of variance, and it is associated with an eigenvalue of greater than 2 (2.052). Hence, the overall perception of conflicts – understood as a generalized assessment of tensions felt in various dimensions of the social structure – forms a coherent construct with a clear empirical interpretation.

In terms of index construction, we do not see very much change over time in the measurement properties of the global perception of social conflicts. The only noticeable change is that, in 1998, the relative impact of the two indicators – rich versus poor and rulers versus ruled – slightly diminished. For the entire period, 1988–1998, the most important indicator of the global perception of social conflicts is either the nature of work or organizational authority. Economic divisions and differences in the access to power are of lesser importance, but are still statistically significant.

Using the index of the overall perception of structural conflicts one can study the dynamics of people's attitudes and orientations toward social divisions. A relatively low correlation of the index for 1988 and 1993 ($r = 0.139$) demonstrates that, in the initial phase of the systemic transformation, a fundamental change occurred. In the advanced phase of the transformation, the perception of conflicts became more stabilized. For the 1993 and 1998 scales, the correlation increased to 0.318.

An interesting aspect in the dynamic analysis of the perception of structural conflicts pertains to changes in perception at the individual level. Assuming quartile division of the scales, over two-thirds of respondents changed their perception of social conflicts during the first phase of the transformation between 1988 and 1993. In the advanced phase of the transformation, changes of the same magnitude occurred less frequently. In a sense, these results parallel those of the correlation analysis.

Regression Models

A model based on panel regression helps to explain the mechanism conditioning the perception of social conflicts in terms of change. In the model explaining the perception of conflicts in 1998, we include as the input data the perception of conflicts in 1993. Including a *lagged variable* allows us to interpret the regression coefficients for all other independent variables as coefficients revealing their impact on the change in our dependent variable.

It is evident that the perception of the potential for conflict is strongly conditioned by the perception of social conflicts existing at an earlier time. From the previous study, we know that the value of *beta* for the *lagged variable* for the perception of conflicts in 1993 was 0.133. Five years later, in 1998, the corresponding value for the *lagged variable* increased to 0.295. Is there any room for the impact of other variables?

The model presented in Table 13.3 contains the three most important social stratification variables: education, occupation, and income. As background information, we should note that among these variables in 1993, there was a noticeable impact of occupation and income but not of education. The present results show that education, measured by the number of years of schooling, still does not produce any significant direct effect on the perception of social conflicts. However, occupation has lost its significance. The occupational qualifications criterion proved essential only during the initial phase of the transformation. During that phase, unqualified workers

perceived social conflicts more intensely, no matter whether their work was manual or nonmanual (Janicka 2000), than did skilled workers. However, in the advanced phase of the transformation, the perception of conflicts does not depend on occupational qualifications.

Table 13.3. Regression of the 1998 Scale of Perceived Social Conflicts on Social Stratification and Political Experience, Controlling for Basic Demographic Variables and the 1993 Scale of Perceived Social Conflicts

Independent variables	Regression coefficients		
	B	SE	beta
<i>Lagged variable</i>			
Scale of perceived social conflicts, 1993	0.301	0.034	0.295
<i>Demographic variables</i>			
Gender (male = 1)	-0.175	0.065	-0.089
Age (years)	0.000	0.003	0.005
Urban/rural (urban = 1)	0.105	0.075	0.049
<i>Social stratification variables</i>			
Education (years of schooling)	-0.002	0.014	-0.005
Occupation ^a	-0.035	0.077	-0.015
Income	-0.093	0.055	-0.066
<i>Political experience</i>			
Communist party membership (yes = 1)	0.168	0.102	0.058
Voting ^b	0.117	0.080	0.048
Constant	-0.232	0.619	
Adjusted R ² = 0.102			

^a On the scale of qualification requirements (low level of qualification = 1; otherwise = 0).

^b Declared absenteeism from future participation in elections (yes = 1)

The objective economic situation, measured by per capita income in the respondent's household, constitutes an independent stratification variable that produces an important effect on the perception of structural conflicts and tensions in both phases of the transformation. Low income of the respondent makes his or her perception of conflicts more acute.

Membership in the communist party and voting behavior have some importance for the perception of conflicts in both phases of the transformation. As compared to the initial phase, the influence of leftist orientations – measured by communist party membership – on the perception of conflicts rises in the advanced phase, albeit not statistically significant.

Communist party membership, due to ideological conditioning, may facilitate greater criticism and disapproval toward the effects of the transformation. Declared absenteeism from future participation in elections was significant in 1993, but it lost its significance in 1998.

Women perceive social divisions as inducing conflicts more intensely than men do. This effect may be associated with women's less advantageous placement in the job market and in the socio-occupational structure, a situation demonstrated by occupational segregation and generally lower wages. Women's situation, which is clearly disadvantageous at the beginning of systemic transformation, does not improve very much in its advanced phase (Domanski 1992; Janicka 1995; Titkow and Domanski 1995). It is therefore likely that the effects of discriminatory practices experienced by women cause their perception of inequality to be more acute.

In contrast to gender, age contributes almost nothing to the perception of conflicts. The effect of age on the dependent variable is statistically insignificant.

In 1993, a person's residence in rural areas was conducive to his or her perceiving the social divisions as conflicting. This tendency can probably be explained on the basis of more difficult life conditions in rural areas – as compared to cities – and less advantageous economic effects of systemic transformation. Despite undoubted progress in developing the technological infrastructure in the countryside and general sociocultural development, the rural standard of life still lags behind that available in the city (Szymczak 2001; Piecek 2001). Even though this situation remained unchanged in the advanced phase of the transformation, it was in the city, rather than in the countryside, that we registered an increase in the perception of social conflicts. It is likely that city dwellers felt the negative results of the transformation later than their counterparts in the countryside, or that their aspirations for a better life rose faster than reality could accommodate them.

Conclusion

The majority of respondents assessed that differences in wealth and the division of people into rulers and the rest of society constitute the main sources of social conflicts. In the first phase of transformation, a perception of both these factors as conflicting strengthened, despite a general acceptance of radical political and economic changes. The high social costs of modernizing the economy between 1989 and 1993 probably contributed to such a trend. With the implementation of the new system, particularly in the

advanced phase of the transformation, the opinion became more widespread that the nature of work and organizational authority produce strong tensions among people.

Panel regression was carried out to study the conditioning of the perception of conflicts in a dynamic framework. It turned out that the conflicting character of social structure perceived in 1998 is to a large extent a function of its perception in 1993. Because of a stabilization of opinions registered in the second phase of systemic transformation, the effect of other variables on the perception of social conflicts is generally small. It is interesting that, as compared to the first phase of the transformation, normally important stratification variables, such as education and occupation, lose their importance in the perception of conflict. The only stratification variable maintaining its former importance in this respect in the second phase of transformation is the respondent's income.

The impact of political experience on perceived conflicts is very weak. Although respondents who had belonged to the Polish United Workers Party (before 1989) in the advanced phase of the post-communist transition (in 1998) perceived conflicts less intensely than in the initial phase (in 1993), the impact of party membership was not yet statistically significant. In addition, declared absenteeism from future participation in elections was significant in 1993, but it lost its significance in 1998.