How to investigate civil society?
Practitioners' experiences

S u m m a r y

Although there is no general consensus on the thesis that civil society studies can be interpreted as a separate sub-discipline which uses specific research methods and techniques, it is obvious that the growing number of sociological investigations and works concerning the issue of social activity necessitates an in-depth discussion on this matter. This publication is a collection of articles by Polish sociologists dealing with the problem of civil society and social activity. Its aims are to trigger such a debate, and to contribute to the development of methodological reflection among researchers of civil society.

The book consists of a preface, and three parts, each of which contains chapters concerning a particular set of issues. At the end of the book there are three shorter texts which comprise the records of the discussions about the state-of-the-art in Polish civil society research that took place at the conference in Poznań in 2007.

The preface can be divided into two parts. The first is an attempt to present the basic assumptions of the whole book. The author, having characterized the difficulties of operalization of the very concept of civil society, proposes a typology of civil society and social activity research. This is based on two dimensions: methodology (public opinion methodology and sectoral research methodology), and two perspectives (intra-group perspective and inter-group perspective). The second part of the preface is a description of the articles that follow.

The first part of the book is entitled "From the review of methods and techniques of civil society research to mapping of social activity", and is composed of articles dealing mainly with quantitative research techniques. It starts with the introductory article, "How to investigate civil society? A review of methods and techniques", by Michal Nowosielski, co-editor of the book. The aim of this article is to describe the rich variety of research instruments available for civil society and social activity researchers. The author describes some of the techniques used in the description of surveys, observation, interviews, network analysis, and others.

The second text is by Barbara Lewenstein and Maria Theiss, and is entitled "Researching social capital *in statu nescendi*". It describes an audit study of the results of one of the social activization projects undertaken in Poland. The analysis helped the authors to identify two types of network structures characteristic of different types of local communities.

The authors of the next article, "Social forces in Poznań—surveys and in-depth interviews as tools for civil society and social activity research", are Marek Nowak and Michał

Nowosielski. Alongside the description of their research experiences, the authors propose a typology of surveys used in civil society research. The basic types of surveys are described as individual surveys conducted on general public samples, individual samples conducted on participants, and organisational surveys. These types can be further subdivided in terms of the purpose of the research (whether it is a single or comparative research project).

The last text in this part, written by Piotr Frączak and Ryszard Skrzypiec, is "The map of social civic activity as a tool for local civil society research". It describes a method more often applied by social geographers than by sociologists—mapping. Their analysis consists of case studies of local communities concentrated on the description of certain social actions in specific geographic and administrative areas.

The second part of the book, "From grounded theory, through frame analysis, to biographical method", collects articles which describe the use of typical quantitative research techniques. It starts with a text by Irena Szlachcicowa, "Patterns of social actions in the perspective of grounded theory methodology". Although rooted in the Chicago School and John Dewey's pragmatism, grounded theory has introduced a new style of quantitative analysis. It entails systematic and intensive analysis of the available data and, more importantly, continuous comparisons of the results, searching for maximal and minimal similarity and for differences between categories. Irena Szlachcic puts forward the thesis that setting up a methodology of civil society research is pointless—because of the ambiguous character of the very concept. The theoretical structure of "civil society" ought to be reinvented through inductive analysis, rather than treated as a consequence of a certain theoretical standpoint.

The next study, "The application of grounded theory methodology for civil society studies", by Mateusz Szczeciński and Tomasz Stryjecki, has a more empirical character. It presents the basic assumptions of grounded theory methodology with examples of specific analyses of social actions. These are analyses of posts on internet forums concerning projects to beautify and improve the appearance of the city of Łódź. Their aim has been to explore the motivations of the participants in the discussion, and to describe the course of their social activity.

Another example of a quantitative research method has been described by Dorota Rancew-Sikora in her article, "Discourse analysis as a method of social action research". Thus is based on an interpretation of the basic sociological question concerning discourse as a source of knowledge. According to the author, two spheres can be distinguished —the discursive and the social sphere. In contemporary society, the role of sociologist should be reconstructed, and more emphasis should be placed on discourse in analyses of social actions.

Discourse analysis is the basis of another study, "Frame discourse analysis as a method of civil society research", by Kazimiera Wódz and Maciej Witkowski. The article is a summary of the EU-funded CIVGOV research project which used Ervin Goffman's frame analysis to compare European societies. The frame is treated here as the most important instrument in the toolkit for constructing social actions—it defines the social context, the catalogue of motivations, the important goals, and helps to make decisions about using certain tactics and strategies to achieve those goals.

Galia Chimiak in her text, "Becoming a social activist: Methods of researching civil society participants", mixes supply-side theories researching motivations and biographies of activists, with the biographical method typical of humanistic sociology. The author uses typologies as an analytical tool.

The next part of the book, "From new media to social activism", contains two studies. The first, "Civil society and the Internet—methodological aspects", by Agnieszka Jeran proposes an interesting interpretation of the Internet as a communication medium that contributes to the development of civil society. The author introduces eight research procedures based on a continuum of actions: from actions that do not use the Internet to actions that are possible only on the Internet. These research procedures mix both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

The second article here is "Citizen journalism—between the practice of social utopia and the utopia of research practice" by Rafał Drozdowski. It describes the dilemmas that stand before civil society researchers. On one hand, there are serious doubts about how to define what civil society is, and on the other hand the question arises whether civil society is in fact something more than a utopia, or fantasy created by ideologists and frustrated activists. In spite of these doubts, the concept of civil society is still alive and has become a "flagship" of social discourse on democratization and civil participation. The author describes "citizen journalism" as an illustration of a phenomenon of marginalisation of conventional (associational) civil society. Instead, new audiences arise that are oriented towards individuals themselves as simultaneous senders and receivers of messages. Examples of such phenomena include internet web 2.0 services.

The book ends with three shorter texts that are comments on the state-of-the-art of Polish civil society research, written by Michał Chmara, Piotr Gliński, and Zbigniew Woźniak.