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EXPLORATORY WALKS AS AN EXAMPLE OF NETWORKING RESEARCH

A walk may be a good way to collect valuable research material. Moreover, it may also be an opportunity to undertake social interventions. Naturally, all of that refers to a walk that has been intentionally organized by the researcher, according to precisely defined procedures and with the participation of a competent informer: a 'guide'.

The article explores a concept that combines learning about the reality in the field with the intention of introducing social changes. The interventions apply to interpersonal, interorganizational and intersectoral relations and aim at inducing changes in the local community. As such research is most importantly focused on bringing various people, initiatives, communities, institutions and industries together, it is referred to as 'networking research' (*badania sieciujące*).

In the article, 'exploratory walks' (*spacery badawcze*) are presented as an example of how the concept of networking research may be used. Cognitive and practical advantages of such an approach are discussed, particularly in relation to the process of urban renewal (revitalization). The article has been divided into three parts. The first one introduces the concept of networking research, presents its sources of inspiration and basic theoretical assumptions. The second part shows why it is the technique of exploratory walks that has been chosen to learn about the social reality and shape it at the same time. The last part of the article, one of practical nature, presents several principles of the 'walk & talk research' that is carried out to diagnose local communities and design revitalization programs. A number of examples have been provided in order to show what the 'networking' nature of such research consists in.

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What is networking research?

In the 'networking research', the researcher is involved in creating, strengthening and analyzing relations and connections that exist between various stakeholders and should be conducive to social changes. Such research can be seen as part of a broader concept of 'action research', as it combines research activities with practical actions. The role of the researcher here is complex, as indicated in the literature:

- The researcher is taking part in the process and at the same time analyzing the relations between what is individual and what is social.

- The researcher is personally and actively involved in the research.

- The researcher is cooperating with a team of people, and his work is subjected to continuous assessment. Influenced by the others, the researcher is trying to perfection his work.

- Research activities aim at making the reality better and improving the situation of some groups or categories of inhabitants.

- The research is critical (often exposing) and motivated by the disagreement with the existing situation.

- It is also reflective and dialectic: it helps people to reflect on their own practice, change it, draw some conclusions, make further improvements; it allows them to comprehend the situation in which they are living and acting (Bąbska, Rymsza 2014, pp. 111-112).

- A relationship is established between the researcher and the researched: they become partners. The researcher takes part both in formal and informal structures of the researched community.

- Such a form of participation allows for continuous observation, combined with unstructured conversations, which can also turn into indepth interviews (ibid., p. 113).

In the case of networking research, there are another two important aspects of the role of the researcher:

- The researcher is focused on the research itself as well as on bringing diverse institutions, organizations, domains of social life, communities and people together.

- When he enters various communities, the researcher not only functions as a 'liaison' but also looks for others who would liaise between those divided or poorly interconnected.

Networking research is based on three basic assumptions, presented in more detail in another article (Kwiatkowski 2015). Firstly, in a network society an adequate and efficient way to act individually and collectively is to do networking, i.e. to create, maintain and develop networks of contacts and cooperation. In such a society, according to Manuel Castells, "[p]resence or absence in the network and the dynamics of each network *vis-á-vis* others are critical sources of domination and change in our society" (Castells 2007, p. 468).

Second of all, the assumption is that the way individuals and groups are located in social networks has an impact on their life chances. The position in a network may be a better descriptor of the situation of a given person or group than their socioeconomic status, and it may also have a stronger influence on this situation. Parag Khanna (2016, p. 5) puts it simply: "The more connections we have, the more options we have". This means there is a need to strengthen social relations, and this very need is addressed by the networking research.

Thirdly, if someone's position in a social network / social networks to a large extent determines their life situation (their well-being, professional and material status), then social networks should be taken into account while diagnosing the situation of disadvantaged individuals and groups and developing support strategies. This includes both personal networks of the disadvantaged and the networks of relevant institutions and organizations. Therefore, in the light of these three assumptions, social changes cannot occur unless cooperation beyond barriers is strengthened.

The concept of networking research has drawn upon various sources of inspiration. The research on social capital, carried out by social scientists, has been one of them: especially the line of research that distinguishes between the three kinds of social capital: bonding, bridging and linking (Sztopmka 2016), as well as the so-called 'network approach'.

In his latest book, Robert Putnam (2015, p. 259) discusses an 'opportunity gap' and emphasizes how important it is to 'invest' in disprivileged communities. However, what he underlines even stronger is the need of placing poor families in the communities of a higher material status. This is an example of how one may use the concept of building 'linking social capital': a capital that results from linking people and groups coming from disprivileged communities with people and groups who have higher positions on the social-economic ladder.

The research on social networks that makes no direct reference to the concept of social capital can also be seen as an important source of inspiration. In the literature, numerous reasons can be found why social networks are important in the life of individuals and organizations, including the reasons listed by Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler (2011, p. 107). Social movements researchers note that social networks may increase the chance of individuals getting involved into collective actions (della Porta, Diani 2009, p. 128).

The concepts that describe working with local communities are more and more frequently including the networking point of view. Alison Gilchrist (2014, p. 11) considers networking to be the basic way local communities are organized. Steve Skinner (2014, pp. 56-57) takes a similar approach, emphasizing the importance of both formal and informal networks. They can attract and engage disadvantaged individuals (networks provide organizational structure for many categorical communities). They encourage informal sharing of experiences, contacts and skills (a channel for education and exchange). They also make it possible for minority groups to establish relations while preserving their own identities. Furthermore, they can serve as a useful resource for social groups and non-governmental organizations, being a platform to meet up and organize potential-building processess.

Last but not least, this author's personal experiences, both as a practitioner and as a researcher, have also been an important source of inspiration. In the course of various social actions, including field research, barriers for development have been observed. They are serious and difficult to overcome, and include e.g. distinct boundaries between sectors, different logics of various social institutions, the lack of needed contacts and the limited ability of cooperation between the communities. The networking research aims at analyzing those barriers and, at the same time, overcoming them. Exploratory walks are an example of such research. Below, a description of this technique follows, with focus on its advantages in the context of revitalization.

Exploratory walks: why?

'Exploratory walks' are individual and collective interviews that are carried out in the public space. The researcher and the informer, the latter referred to as a guide or an expert, are walking together within a deliberately chosen area. This is conducive to developing a better understanding of the phenomena, processes and regularities to be analyzed, and should also contribute to solving problems observed in the chosen area. In this paper, the informer is referred to as the 'guide', as the informer is in fact an expert

with a detailed knowledge about a given area or a topic.

A number of relevant arguments suggest that the exploratory walk technique can indeed be considered as a good way to learn more about local communities and contribute to their development.

1. First of all, such a meeting, in movement, situated in a specific space, is a source of valuable inspirations. It makes it easier to notice various phenomena. In many cases, the researcher alone would not be able to make those discoveries. The very context of a walk, the changing landscape, new objects emerging on the horizon prompt the informers to share their reflections. It is also a good occasion to confront opinions, e.g. about the aesthetic aspects of an object. It is particularly inspiring to organize walks with people whose opinions about phenomena and processes existing in a given area differ, for instance due to their different professions or their different social status. Walking together through a space that is experiencing some problems is more inspiring than a regular 'stationary' interview. It generates new ideas for possible interventions. This leads us to the second argument in favor of exploratory walks.

2. Exploratory walks can be a factor of change, in three different ways. They can change the researchers themselves, their information resources and even their attitude to a given problem. As a result of an exploratory walk, a change may also occur in the knowledge and the attitude of the guide. The most important and desirable change would be, however, one in the way the community functions. How is that possible? How exploratory walks can trigger such a change? The answer is provided in the next argument.

3. Exploratory walks, if organized according to the principles, can contribute to social integration and to the coordination of various efforts to introduce desirable changes. During exploratory walks, contacts are established and strengthened, which fosters the cooperation between individuals, organizations and institutions as well as between sectors. This activity can be referred to as 'networking'.

4. Numerous best practices described in the literature or known to the author are another argument speaking in favor of the exploratory walk technique. The most important examples come from Denmark, including the systematic presence in the public space described by Jan Gehl in his books (2009), and the bottom-up approach to shaping public space (Bondyra, Gancewska 2015). The experiences I made

during my field research in several municipalities are also a very strong argument for applying this technique.

5. The last argument refers to formal requirements. The Polish Revitalization Act (*Ustawa o rewitalizacji*) that entered into force in fall 2015 clearly lists exploratory walks as a good way to diagnose crisis phenomena. The document puts a strong emphasis on adopting a complex approach to revitalization. It seems that it is the exploratory walk technique that can to the largest extent incorporate environmental, infrastructural, economic, social and cultural aspects at the same time.

The concise nature of this article does not allow for elaborate examples, which would be a good illustration and explanation of the presented assumptions, principles and arguments. Here, only one minor but meaningful example will be discussed. In a town in Western Poland, research has been conducted on crisis phenomena and the possibilities to overcome the difficulties by means of a revitalization program. One of the important research questions concerned the cultural potential of the town and the ways to use it. Here, exploratory walks turned out to be a valuable way to collect information. They allowed the researcher to discern and reconstruct the relations between various aspects of the researched space.

For instance, well-preserved medieval walls were identified as a potential. If some conditions were fulfilled, they could become a major tourist attraction. A degraded area around those walls (garages, sheds, thick bushes, damaged roads) was considered as one of the deficits. Subsequent walks with various guides generated a number of ideas for future interventions. One of the postulated changes was to build a route for pedestrians and cyclists along the walls. Two kinds of pavement were suggested during the walks. As a person in a wheelchair was deliberately selected as one of the guides, the optimal kind of pavement could be chosen for the future route. Photograph 1 presents the pavement which fulfils the criterion of 'historicity'. However, the walk showed that such a pavement would make it more difficult for cyclists, people in wheelchairs and parents with strollers to use the route. The pavement presented in photograph 2 was considered to be better. This little example shows that going out in the field, having a look at its potentials and deficits from various perspectives, confronting those perspectives and trying to find an agreement, is a particularly fruitful way to learn about the reality and to change it.

Figure 1. The pavement for the future route, submitted to the consultations.
Source: picture made by M. Kwiatkowski.

Figure 2. The pavement for the future route, chosen in the course of exploratory walks
in Strzelce Krajeńskie.
Source: picture made by M. Kwiatkowski.

The next part of the article will present practical advice, inspired by the above-mentioned theoretical and methodological concepts but also resulting from the personal research experience of the author.

How to conduct exploratory walks?

For the exploratory walks to be truly educational, they need to be preceded by a sequence of tasks. Here, we will refer to those tasks as 'steps'. The first step is about determining goals and research questions. In the case of research related to revitalization processes, those questions refer mainly to the potential found in a given area, i.e. those elements and properties that may contribute to the process of change. Another important goal is to identify deficits in the investigated area and to collect and compile suggestions (formulated in the course of walks) on how to solve problems and make use of the identified potentials.

The second step is to indicate the areas in which the walks are about to take place. It is a good idea to plan the route, including its most important ('obligatory') stops: places we would like to have a look at from different perspectives. Apart from the planned route and those 'obligatory' stops, it is worth asking guides to show us places that were not part of the original plan but for various reasons seem relevant.

The third step is about choosing the right time for walks. In some cases, this choice is crucial. The more the use of some space depends on the time of the day (or the day of the week), the more important it is to reflect on that while planning the walk. A study on the presence of various traffic participants (pedestrians, cyclists, drivers of private and public vehicles) is a good example for that. In this case, phases can be usually observed. In order to investigate them properly, walks at different times of the day are needed.

The next step is to prepare the team as well as the tools. The researcher may work alone but working in pairs seems to be the optimal solution. This way, it is possible to divide tasks. One researcher focuses on the conversation with the guide, the other one takes care of rather 'technical' tasks (taking notes and photos). Taking pictures is an important part of exploratory walks. Apart from a camera, the researcher should also be equipped with a notepad and, if need be, with a voice recorder. To be on the safe side, it is a good idea to bring an umbrella, too. The preparation process also includes compiling a list of information and opinions to be acquired. Such a list will be based on general assumptions and goals, the planned route and 'obligatory' stops, and it will serve as a basis for formulating questions to the guide.

While getting prepared for this kind of research, it is of uttermost importance to make a selection of guides. How should such a choice be made? First of all, the researcher should ensure that the guides represent various fields of activities (infrastructure, economy, the environment, social issues, culture) and various sectors of social life (public sector: administration, schools; private sector: businesses, business organizations; social sector: nongovernmental organizations, informal groups). Second of all, the guides should represent different views, too. For instance, they should not be all in favor of local authorities or all against them. It is desirable to reach both formal and informal leaders, enthusiasts and opponents of revitalization. When we apply this diversity principle, we are given a chance for confrontation, dialog and reconciling different points of view.

While trying to come up with the final list of guides, it is worth using a list of guides suggested by the municipal authorities as a starting point. However, our list should be longer and should also include people that we have found using the 'snowball effect'. If the research study has been commissioned by local authorities, it is a good idea to send out invitations to the guides, signed by a high representative of the authorities. Such an 'honorable' invitation may be a powerful incentive to get involved and take an active part in the project. The number of guides listed for participation should be higher than the target number, as some may refuse to take part or there may be other obstacles that would prevent the researchers from fully implementing their plans. Simply put, we should have some 'reserve' to ensure that the deadline for delivering results will be met.

The field work experience shows that one walk takes one to two hours. If several walks are to take place on the same day, a good idea is to schedule them every two hours. When making the appointments, one should think of guides' social roles and professions. Officials, delegated by their supervisors (which is often the case) are quite eager to take part in walks organized during their working hours. On the other hand, an entrepeneur may have a tight schedule with lots of business trips. To make it all work, we should be quite flexible while setting the date and time of the meeting.

One could say that exploratory walks, as a diagnostic technique used for designing revitalization programs, are of networking nature per se. Firstly, to prepare them, an access to a network of contacts, suggested by the client (usually municipal authorities), is needed. Secondly, the task entails expanding this network by adding new elements ('snowball technique'). Thirdly, the researchers expand their networks of contacts. This way they get an access to information, knowledge, opinions and valuable experience. Consequently, they are able to reconstruct a more detailed image of the re-

ality. Moreover, they become some kind of intermediaries in the discussion between people representing different views and opinions.

Exploratory walks may also carry out other functions related to networking. For instance, the researcher may intentionally try to serve as an intermediary, one that facilitates communication and cooperation, and consequently contributes to an increase in the efficiency of institutions. Even in small communities people who should know each other and work with each other may not be in touch. It is not uncommon that institutions and organizations target their offers at the same clients but do not coordinate their efforts. Exploratory walks are sometimes an occasion to discover such 'interinstitutional gaps' and to make an attempt to bridge them. Walks may also be an opportunity to collect and pass on information regarding the needs of disprivileged individuals and families. Thanks to the knowledge acquired in the field, the researcher may inspire interventions and support on the part of social services and charities.

Another task is connected with the need to create a team of stakeholders that would supervise and support revitalization processes. The Revitalization Act of October 2015 includes a formal requirement to set up a Revitalization Committee, which is an advisory and consultative body to the municipal authorities. Exploratory walks are a good opportunity to recruit citizens and institutions for such an initiative.

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The essential element of networking research is the researcher's involvement in the process of creating, strengthening and analyzing relations and connections that exist between various stakeholders and should be conducive to social change. Exploratory walks are a special type of networking research. They consist in conducting individual and collective interviews in the public space, with a guide – an expert – playing an active part in the process.

In the light of the presented arguments, networking research addresses the needs of the modern society. It is particularly useful in local communities, which due to the lacking social bonds are often unable to efficiently solve their problems. A researcher, working on a diagnosis of a given community, intentionally contributes to creating 'good connections' between the investigated individuals, organizations and groups.

The 'walk and talk' technique, a special case of networking research, can be successfully used for developing revitalization programs, as it takes into consideration the complex nature of the process, one that includes infrastructural, environmental, economic, social, and cultural aspects. The

researcher, using and developing a network of expert contacts, is able to carry out a deep, complex diagnosis of potentials, deficits and possibilities for change in a given community. Thanks to his networking role towards people, initiatives, groups and institutions, the researcher contributes to making social changes that satisfy inhabitants' expectactions and needs.

This article only presents the general overview of networking research studies and exploratory walks. There is a need to further investigate this topic and enhance research procedures as well as to ensure and facilitate future social experiments. That notwithstanding, other related domains and concepts should also be investigated, as their heritage might enrich the spectrum of available research procedures, techniques, and tools.

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Keywords: action research, cross-linking studies, research "walk & talk", revitalization, participation.

The article concerns the author's concept of a specific kind of social research. "Networking research" rely on connecting field work research with the intention of making social change. The aim of the networking research is "networking",ie. the strengthening of interpersonal relations, inter-organizational and cross-sector relations in the local community. This article presents "exploratory walk" (or "walk & talk") as an example of application the concept of networking research. The article indicates the cognitive and practical benefits of using this approach, with particular emphasis on the revitalization process. The article presents the theoretical foundations of the networking research concept. It indicates a source of inspiration and basic assumptions. It justifies choosing the exloratory walk technique as a way of learning and simultaneously changing social reality. It presents some rules of conducting the "walk & talk" technique in the context of diagnosing a local community. It also presents how to use the method in during a process of preparing of revitalization programs. It also explains, presenting selected examples, what is the "networking" nature of the research.