

A R T Y K U Ł Y I R O Z P R A W Y

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A DUET ON ENGAGEMENT:
CHALLENGES AND DILEMMAS OF THE RESEARCHER
OF ETHNICITIES IN POLAND IN THE EARLY 1990S

Research on ethnic or national minorities and cultural diversity is socially important and highly politicized. The subject is connected with issues of nationalism, national policies on minorities, and the active management of cultural diversity by nation states. Research in the area is thus particularly sensitive to the political context and to the axiological climate in regard to cultural separateness. For at least thirty years, researchers of ethnicity have been interested in describing the relationship between identity, culture, and power (politics). At present, the dimension of politics is difficult to ignore in studying the identity of cultural groups, including ethnic communities. The political aspect can be linked to the growing importance of various kinds of emancipation practices of social actors motivated by the concept of identity.

Here we will take a retrospective look at the research that we have conducted since the early 1990s on ethnic minorities in Poland. Consideration of our research choices and practices at the beginning of this period is a kind of methodological reflexivity deriving from our need to address questions such as positioning, power, the place and role of an anthropologist in the research process, the social and political determinants of field activities, the situation of the researcher in relation to the subjects, and

the prevailing discursive forms. Reflecting on the experience of researchers on ethnic minorities who went “into the field” in the early 1990s also allows us to show what strategies a researcher can adopt in such a research area, given its politicization.

We have divided our discussion into several parts. The first concerns the social context in which we began our research. The second part only signals the issue of engagement in anthropology. The third contains two retrospective voices from the “field,” which will allow the reader to imagine the problems we once faced and which from today’s perspective seem crucial in studies of this type.

THE CONTEXT OF RESEARCH ON ETHNICITIES

In Poland, the 1990s was a period of breakthrough and transformation with great significance for both the minority communities we studied and for the Polish majority. Among the many changes that occurred then censorship was abolished and citizens obtained freedom of speech and association. These events not only allowed identities that had previously been hidden behind the facade of private life to appear in the public sphere but also enabled the institutionalization of the collective life of minorities and influenced their visibility. The authorities’ policy toward minorities also changed (Bojar 1995; Łodziński 2005).

According to the doctrine adopted by the communists, ethnic homogeneity had been achieved (Mironowicz 2000). The ideological project of the socialist state premised homogeneity in the social and political dimension and provided mechanisms enabling diversity to be suppressed (Bojar 1997). The effect of a state policy “invalidating” minority problems was their elimination from public discourse, “[...] an assimilation policy was undertaken that was characterized by considerable repressiveness and limiting the activity of the national minorities remaining in Poland to a narrow and state-controlled area of folklore” (Bojar 1997: 404). Not quite intentionally, the authorities of the Polish People’s Republic implemented a nationality policy that closely resembled the nationalist concepts of the National Democrats (Mironowicz 2000). Issues connected with the cultural diversity of the state, or with ethnic and national minorities, were not of serious interest to scholars. In the first years after the war, due to increased censorship and the sensitivity of the subject, the problem of minorities was avoided in both scholarship and journalism (Bojar 2000). Only in the 1960s did the first papers on selected minorities appear. Their numbers were few, though, and they did

not fully show the ethnic-national diversity of Polish society (Mironowicz 2000).

The changes in the sphere of ethnic relations taking place in the early 1990s have been described primarily in terms of the revival or invigoration of minorities (Bojar 1995, 2000; Łodziński 1992, 2005). During this time, many social initiatives also appeared under the ethnic banner. Ethnicity began to be practiced publicly, and not as before only at home or in forms imposed by the authorities. Slowly, such activity became clearly goal-oriented, organized, and reflective.

The state initiated a policy based on recognizing the right of members of ethnic and national minorities to uphold their own cultural identity and recognized their rights to pursue, together with other members of the given community, various social or political undertakings. The long process of institutionalizing ethnic relations ended with the adoption in 2005 of the Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and on the Regional Languages. Thus, at the formal and legal level, a decision was made to depart from assimilation in favor of integration in the spirit of a policy of multiculturalism (Łodziński 2005).

Thus, at the beginning of the 1990s, when we began our research, a clear change in the axiological climate in regard to the ethno-cultural diversity of Polish society was felt. This difference began to be appreciated, at least in public discourse. Importantly, being liberated from the previously existing restrictions imposed by the authorities, scholars could freely choose whom, what, when, and how they would study. Since the ethnic field had been only limitedly cultivated for years and as no research at all had been conducted in relation to certain groups—for instance, officially there was no German minority in Poland—new areas of interest appeared. Despite the changes, entering the “field” during the breakthrough period still produced some challenges. First of all, the “old” state of affairs made itself felt in the form of a lack of confidence in the researcher, who was associated with someone who was asking questions for reasons that were not entirely clear, or in the general reluctance of the research subjects to talk about ethnic matters. What was also striking was the lack among the people studied of words in which to describe their belonging to a community. Such terms as ethnicity, ethnic group, or ethnic minority were not included in the subjects’ vocabulary, nor did they arouse associations as to their semantic content. These categories were empty of meaning to them. Thus we had to deal with either helplessness in creating a self-description or with a simplified form of description. This can clearly be seen when we compare the statements of that time with those of today, when eth-

nic actors have not only knowledge but also the ability to use it. At the same time, the lack of a pluralism of theory and research practice in regard to ethnic issues in the Polish People's Republic (the dominance of objective approaches, the essentialization of the described communities) and the absence of research on ethno-cultural communities meant that members of those communities were not socialized in regard to matters or knowledge that we would define in the language of scholarship as being "ethnic."

ON ENGAGEMENT

From today's perspective, the key issue facing scholars is that of their engagement and the entanglement of cultural diversity issues in power relations and inequalities. In anthropology, these issues have appeared at different times and in varying contexts (Eriksen 2006). Moreover, as Seth M. Low and Sally E. Merry (2010: 207–211) write, "[...] anthropologists are engaged in a variety of ways, but, as indicated by history, they do not necessarily agree about what constitutes engagement much less about the form that it should take." They point out that involvement can translate into such practices as sharing and support, teaching and public education, social critique, collaboration, advocacy, and activism.

Sherry Ortner (2019) argues that engaged anthropology is not a new phenomenon. In her opinion, the approach dates back to the 1970s and has been connected with such theoretical and political orientations as Marxism, feminism, anti-colonialism, and critical race studies. If it was a niche practice before, it is now possible to speak of a kind of "engaged turn." Many researchers decide to formulate research projects in such a way as to engage critically in the important matters of our time. This applies to the stage of conceptualization—when according to Ortner (2019) studies must be based, as the *sine qua non* of involved or critical anthropology, on criticism of the asymmetry of power—and to the stage of choosing a methodology, and in this case the principle is "whatever works," that is, the use of all possible methodological solutions that allow the research problem to be solved. Engagement also occurs at the stage of producing an ethnographic text, and passion, compassion, sadness, and anger become an inseparable part of expressing that involvement.

In Poland, discussions and publications on ethics in social research and in particular in regard to engaged anthropology have significantly increased the methodological awareness of researchers, but they appeared much later—only at the beginning of the twenty-first century. An import-

ant discussion about the state and engagement of Polish anthropology appeared in the journal (*op. cit.*,) *Maszyna interpretacyjna. Pismo kulturalno-społeczne* in the years 2004–2006.¹ In summarizing this discussion, Marta Songin-Mokrzan (2015) draws attention to various problematizations of engaged anthropology. In her opinion, in the works of Polish ethnologists and anthropologists engagement has been discussed as a struggle for freedom and equality; as the practical application of the results of ethnographic research; as taking responsibility for knowledge; as tools and methods of gaining knowledge; as the participation in public debates; as political (strategic) situatedness of anthropological self and the critical role of science; as a form of a co-existence with other persons allowing an understanding of the nature of humanity as ideology, activism and political interventionism, as well as with critical reflection developed on the basis of “ethnographic detail” and oriented toward social change; political (strategic) situatedness of anthropological self and the critical role of science (as a form of a co-existence with other persons allowing an understanding of the nature of humanity).

Songin-Mokrzan’s overview is a good illustration of what might be important for anthropologists and ethnologists today given the problem of engagement. When we remember the beginning of our research, we realize that when dealing with minority issues we did not have the knowledge we have today. Issues of engagement were not present in the scholarly discourse in Poland at that time. Below we recount, as two voices, our research experience. We had rather divergent experiences: the area in which we conducted research was different, and we faced slightly different challenges.

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

We chose the form of our article, which contains our two individual accounts, intentionally. We wanted to reflect on the subjective problematization of the challenges and dilemmas we faced when conducting research on the ethnicity of minority groups in the 1990s. At the same time, we are aware that every researcher who reflects on their own experience could distribute the accents a little differently and focus on one of many possible forms of engagement (Songin-Mokrzan 2015; Low, Merry 2010).

¹ Filip Wróblewski proposed a fuller, critical discussion of the issue (2010). It returns as a point of reference in the works of other authors (Barański 2010; Górny 2007; Brocki 2013).

Voice I

The following considerations are based on my experience during field research among Polish Tatars in 1991–1994. This research led to a book which was published in 1999 under the title *Tatarzy polscy. Tożsamość religijna i etniczna* (Polish Tatars: Religious and Ethnic Identity) (Warmińska 1999). In reflecting on the past, the problem of engagement creates an essential context.

Looking in retrospect at my approach as an anthropologist and at the values that guided me—in addition to the proper scholarly desire to understand the phenomenon under study, Tatar ethnicity—I can define myself as a researcher “leaning toward engagement,” although it was not a fully articulated, conscious attitude at the time. I should rather speak of a certain predilection for engagement rather than a clearly defined attitude.

Above all, in my first studies of the Tatar community I was driven by the desire to “let the people speak” and to reveal their local interpretation of reality. I understood advocacy not so much as active engagement in the public sphere on behalf of the group as rather making their viewpoint accessible through my texts. In their methodological and theoretical choices, earlier researchers had advocated an *etic* approach and an objective understanding of ethnicity (Jasiewicz 1980; Kamocki 1993; Konopacki 1962, Penkala 1977). Their writing styles did not allow space for the reality under study to be presented from the perspective of the individuals involved. Researchers who understand ethnicity in this way have a list of criteria that determines whether a group has a given character (ethnic, ethnographic, national, etc.) and thus they could state authoritatively with what phenomenon, with what nature, we were dealing. This approach was primarily of an essentializing nature. Such a theoretical choice leads to the creation of entities with given properties, and as a consequence their existence seems indisputable and irresistible. The constructivist and subjectivist perspective of researching ethnicity that I adopted and the *emic* approach were intended to be a departure from the methods of analysis that were dominant in the social sciences at the time. The numerous quotes that appeared in the book showed the local point of view of the Tatar community. There were other reasons for this theoretical and methodological choice. I intended to free my interlocutors from the uniform description of their group imposed not only by the social sciences but also by public discourse: an exotic relic in Polish society, a disappearing community, fading into its Polish surroundings. My writing about their identity was intended to show the dynamics, contextuality, and complexity of that identification.

As Ortner writes, the moment of engagement appears already at the stage of conceptualizing a project. She emphasizes that it is crucial to adopt a critical attitude toward the asymmetry of power. Writing about minority communities from an *emic* point of view sharpens this perspective. In my research and the works that were based on them at the time, I was guided in a certain sense by the desire to take the side of the “weaker,” whose perspective of understanding the world had been suppressed for many years. Giving them a voice was supposed to help empower them. I saw this group as one which for decades had been denied self-determination and its own ethnicity, had remained silent in its own affairs, and, moreover, found itself in the “captivity” of an image created by social science. At the time, the latter aspect was particularly important to me. Showing the more complex, dynamic, and multidimensional character of the Tatars’ identity was intended to be a response to the reifying descriptions of the previous years. I wanted to problematize not who they are essentially but how they understand their identity, their ethnicity, and how they experience it.

During the study I asked my interlocutors to tell me who the Tatars are in their opinion and I repeatedly heard in response that they are an ethnographic group. Thus it was noticeable that a notion from the language of the social sciences had permeated the everyday language. Such a conceptualization came from one of the few ethnological texts on the subject of Tatars created in the Polish People’s Republic: that was how the author characterized the community, in pointing to its status (Jasiewicz 1980). The term functioned like a label for the Tatar community, being reproduced not only during interviews but also in popular science publications in the 1980s and 1990s approved by the group. What was behind it? First of all, nostalgia and regret for what had passed and which—according to my interlocutors—had been lost forever, that is, for Tatar culture. For the most part, they were convinced that they were not sufficiently different from the rest of Polish society to be self-constituting and that their status was uncertain: the group was slowly disappearing and dissolving into its surroundings. They saw similarities rather than differences, processes of assimilation in many spheres of life, apart from religious life, which, according to some, was also declining. Hearing these opinions, I wanted to show my interlocutors how “wrong” they were in their self-descriptions, how firmly those descriptions were embedded in the conceptualizations imposed by public discourse and social science. I wanted to make them realize how “different” and not “similar” they were, and that all that was needed was a change of self-perception to open the road to regaining power over their own identity and cultural resources. I sympathized

very much with those of my interlocutors who in the early 1990s began to work actively for the group. I kept my fingers crossed for the success of their emancipation. However, having been trained by the university to be an objective, distanced researcher, I decided not to be directly involved in Tatar affairs. I just wanted to help in their emancipation, and I expressed that desire primarily by encouraging them to take the capacity for self-description into their own hands and to depart from what had been imposed. The latter issue was particularly important due to the extent of the influence of power and knowledge on the ethnic sphere in Poland at that time. It was something more than the explicit coercion of group members. Above all, in the field I encountered a lack of willingness to lean out of the frame and a deep reluctance of some interlocutors to reveal their otherness, as this could undermine belief in the Polishness of their group. After decades of indoctrination in the vision of Polish society as an ethnic monolith, in which regional and ethnographic communities functioned only on the margins and expression of their own culture could only be folklore, the fear of accusations of “non-Polishness” was palpable. The question was thus of a delicate nature, and many years had to pass before ethnic communities in Poland regained their full voice and subjectivity through the implementation of a so-called identity policy.

In this situation, I made a conscious choice of research perspective. Today, I might say that it was an expression of indirect involvement in the group’s affairs and interests, as I understood them at the time. I was convinced that there were two types of description—“pro-assimilation” and “pro-pluralistic.” The first consisted in emphasizing the processes of a group’s becoming similar to the Polish social environment and minimizing ethnic differences. This approach was typical of an ideology clearly marked by the previous, PPR-style language of power, although it also derived from methods of theorizing on the subject of ethnicity. In the other type of description, attention was focused on the differences—on the “wealth” and “otherness” of Tatar ethnicity. I opted for the “pro-pluralist” side and openly declared the fact in my texts. I did so not solely on account of my then anthropologizing attitude, which consisted of cherishing the differences, or of the literature that I was reading at the time. The model of a complex Muslim-Tatar-Polish identity was supposed, in my opinion, not only to reflect the specificity of the group, but also not to close its members in a reified form. I found it important above all to free the group from what had been imposed on it for years—inherently subcutaneous, unspoken, and a side effect of the regime under which it had lived for many decades. As a consequence, I took responsibility for

the interpretations of Tatar matters I created and the consequent representations of the group.

After the passage of many years now, it might be considered to what extent the conceptualization of the group that I created—on the basis of in-depth field research—has become another imposed representation. In a sense, I was freed from these doubts by the commentary of one of the participants of a meeting devoted to my reflections on Tatar identity. She said something to the effect that “You expressed so well what I feel, what we feel.” I hope that my Tatar project contributed to the well-being of this community (see Warmińska 2016).

Voice II

When many years ago (at the beginning of the 1990s) I became more interested in the Lemko community in Poland, I did not know that studying the politically sensitive issues of stateless minorities—whose divisions in terms of identity generated additional problems (Michna 2016)—would require the resolution of many difficult dilemmas, including negotiation between a desire to remain an impartial, distant observer and various forms of engagement and entanglement. I did not have the awareness—as recommended by George Marcus (1995) in his project of situational activism—that in undertaking any kind of research issue, we are entering the sphere of a kind of symbolic conflict between pre-existing representations. Consequently, in order to define our own position, we must stand for certain values against others. We build temporary alliances with certain entities in order to stand against them in different circumstances. I did not realize that I was at the intersection of various types of personal engagement and the associated obligations and ethical problems, and that all this would obviously define what I would express and how (Marcus 1995). In beginning research, I simply wanted to meet the requirements of scholarship: to remain impartial, objective, and axiologically transparent. Such an attitude had been instilled in me during my sociological studies and also in the anthropology courses that I was attending at the time. Considerations about the researcher’s engagement and ethics in research were then limited to simple directives regarding securing the anonymity of the subjects or obtaining consent for recording an interview. Such an attitude was not, I think, specific to my university. As Michael Herzfeld writes in recalling the memory of Václav Hubinger, in 1992, no voice from Central and Eastern Europe was heard during a conference organized by the EASA in Prague on the ethics of ethnographic observation (see

Kaniowska 2010: 30). In Polish sociology and anthropology, reflection on the researcher's engagement appeared, as we mentioned earlier, only at the beginning of the twenty-first century. I think that this was due not solely to Polish scholarship's having been cut off from the important debates in Western scholarship about anthropology's engagement but that it was also because on our side of the Iron Curtain the engagement of science had the worst sort of associations, being identified with political availability, state control, and "engagement in consolidating the power of the people" during the communist period.

I will start with my choice of a research topic. It was, as I thought at the time, the result of my non-academic interests, my hobby—my experiences as a Beskid guide fascinated by the beauty of the Lower Beskids and its inhabitants—and of the fact that during my studies I had participated in courses on pluralism and multiculturalism taught by Andrzej Paluch. The courses made the topic seem interesting and socially important, including in regard to the necessity of "refuting the lie" of a homogeneous vision of Polish society inherited from the communist period. However, such a choice was a consequence, although at the time I was not aware of it, of changes in the axio-normative atmosphere, which accompanied the political changes and democratization of social life in Poland and resulted in "appreciating differences." Pluralism had become an important social value. After the political transformation, the previous coercively constructed vision of an ethnically homogeneous Polish society was rejected by both the authorities and society. It was accepted that in Poland there are other ethnic and national groups than the Polish majority, other religious groups than the Catholic one. In 1995 Janusz Mucha stated that along with the democratization of social life in Poland the process of its "anthropologization" was underway. This meant that we were dealing with an increase in tolerance for separateness or "otherness," with the disappearance of social exclusion (Mucha 1995). These changes had consequences in social reality. There was a revival in all minority communities, and the sense of cultural distinctness of various groups, which until then had had no way of articulating their needs, was manifested in the public sphere (Bojar 1997; Łodziński 2005). One such group was the Lemko community, which in the few publications that had appeared in the previous period had been described mainly from the perspective of the group's assimilation with Polish society (Pudło 1987; Kwilecki 1974). This description of the group was an important point of reference for me.

I wondered how it could be reconciled with the revitalization of the Lemko community which had been observed since the beginning of the

transformation. In the axiological climate of “valuing difference,” I rejected, like other researchers of my generation, the concepts of assimilation: not so much because of their low explanatory value, but also indubitably because they were too strongly associated with the assimilation ideology and assimilation policy of the communist authorities. As such they aroused the opposition not only of ethnic groups or leaders but also of researchers for whom pluralism had become an important value. In planning my research, I focused not on processes of assimilation, autochthonization, and stabilization, like Andrzej Kwilecki (1974) and Kazimierz Pudło (1987), but on the processes of constructing ethnic identity, its relation with religious affiliation, and the identity dilemmas of members of the group (Michna 1997). In my research I intended to look primarily for ethnic and national distinctiveness. The processes of the Lemkos’ assimilation—although they occurred, as shown by the results of subsequent censuses—disappeared from my field of vision. As for other researchers of my generation, such processes appeared only in the context of negating the transformation tendencies outlined by researchers of the previous period (Michna 1997).

My choice of research approaches and methods—which were located in sociology in the broad sense, with a humanist element recommending that reality should be described in the categories used by the people studied—also influenced the shape of my future engagement and the problems related to it. Qualitative methods, unstructured interviews, participant observation, and a long-term stay in the field were part of the research experience from which my various forms of engagement derived.

My adoption of the recommendations of Anna Wyka (1990), a researcher whose works were very important to me in that period, was also not without significance. Wyka advised researchers to premise the equal social competence of the researcher and the research subjects, and to treat the research process as an exchange in which each side incurs equal psychological costs for participating. Contact between the researcher and the respondents in such an approach is more of a “normal interpersonal relationship” than the neutral observation of an expert looking “down” at the examined object. From being an expert, witness, and observer, the researcher is transformed into a participant in the phenomena being studied. Such a relationship—assuming the cooperation of the people involved—causes the researcher to change under its influence as well, and modifies the research tools and often the entire research process.

This approach makes it extremely difficult for a researcher to remain neutral and objective, and furthermore these are no longer the goals.

Researchers do not have to maintain cool objectivity; they may like the subject of their research; they can reveal their own values and ideological options. Research conducted from the *emic* perspective meant that I was pursuing one of the possible forms of engagement in anthropology. I gave the voice to my interlocutors, eagerly quoting extensive fragments of their interviews, which had been my basic method of collecting material. As Peter Charles Kellet (2009: 24) claims, “[...] from an epistemological perspective all anthropologists are in some ways acting as advocates through documenting and communicating their informants’ perspectives to others.”

However, what had seemed to me appropriate, that is, giving a voice to a minority which to that time had been deprived of the possibility of expressing its own needs and aspirations in the public sphere, was burdened with a certain added risk connected with the internecine identity conflict of the Lemko community. The dispute concerned the status of the group (whether it was an ethnic, regional, ethnographic, linguistic or national group, or separate nation) and its national allegiance. Some of my interlocutors revealed emancipation strivings, postulating their separateness on various levels (ethnic or national), while others saw their group as belonging to different nations (Ukrainian or Carpatho-Rusyn). Whose arguments was I therefore to publicize and how was I to decide for which of the conflicted parties I should be an advocate? Kirsten Hastrup and Peter Elsass (1990), who perceive a researcher’s engagement and advocacy on behalf of the group being studied as a step beyond the scope of science, point to the insolvability of such problems. Each party to the identity conflict expects the researcher to speak only on their behalf. This was clearly visible in the case of the ethnic leaders I studied, who were practicing identity policy and managing the ethnicity of the group. I might have become convinced of the same fact by studying the other Ruthenian communities in Slovakia and Ukraine. On many occasions Rusyns of Ukrainian national consciousness accused me of engaging on the wrong side and that my study of the Carpatho-Rusyn movement was animated by countries hostile to Ukraine and to Ukrainian minorities in neighboring countries (Poland and Slovakia). According to some, I should rather look for the answer to the question of who was behind the Carpatho-Rusyns movement and whose interests were represented by its activists. I thus came to be persuaded that the choices of topic and the issues we intend to analyze are not axiologically “transparent,” and moreover they “[...] do not always coincide with the opinions of the research subjects regarding what they consider interesting and worth presenting” (Rutowicz 2010: 59).

Here another major problem appears: the researcher's influence on the reality being examined and the scope of the researcher's responsibility for the information produced—for showing phenomena connected with marginal social actors as if they had significant social significance and mass support. The opponents of recognizing the ideas of leaders of ethnic emancipatory groups often point to their lack of importance, their actual marginality and lack of support. Moreover, the publication of research findings may strengthen ethnic leaders struggling for recognition and legitimize their aspirations. In their struggle, they reach for various arguments, including those taken from the work of anthropologists conducting field research (Nowicka 2005: 208). Research results or the participation of researchers in projects organized by the group may further validate their aspirations. Consequently, whether we will or no, by conducting and publishing research results we become participants in the processes analyzed. There is no escape. The alternative is to discontinue research, not to publish findings. As Zofia Sokolewicz (2005) stated on taking part in the debate on the state of Polish anthropology in the journal (*op. cit.*), *Maszyna interpretacyjna. Pismo kulturalno-społeczne*, “We don't quite have control over how our works are used, and anthropologists can not be blamed for their subsequent ‘uses’.” Nevertheless, I believe that it is worth being aware of this kind of entanglement “in the field” and the different ways published works may be read during the course of identity disputes within the groups studied.

The problem of the researcher's engagement also includes the obligations that arise in the case of long-term field research and the researcher's entering into relationships that are not limited to interviewing the subjects but may consist of being a “guest” or in regular participation in ethnic events. My long-term stay in the “field” meant that in regard to the Lemko leaders I was studying, the features typical of all interpersonal relations appeared: engagement, and friendship outside the bounds of the professional relationship—of course, with all the limitations that Ewa Nowicka (2005) wrote about in analyzing friendship as an anthropologist's work tool.

Although I was rooting for the community in its struggle to recognize its aspirations, I did not want to practice engaged anthropology. Such involvement seemed to me very ethically questionable when examining a group which was divided in terms of identity. Therefore, I consistently refrained from speaking out (except in scholarly publications) on national disputes in the Lemko community. I became openly involved in the group's affairs and relinquished my position as an observer-researcher only once: in writing an opinion supporting one of the parties to the identity con-

flict, when there was a dispute in 2005 regarding the selection of representatives of the Lemkos community for the Joint Commission of the Government and National and Ethnic Minorities on the basis of the Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and the Regional Languages. Although I had doubts and realized that I was making an arbitrary choice and that there were no scientific tools to determine which side of the conflict deserved support (Hastrup, Elsass 1990), I could not refuse. I was asked to write a review not just by Lemkos I had studied—that is, not solely by collaborators with whom I had conducted research—but colleagues, friends and acquaintances I had known for years. Above all, I felt obliged to give them support in a difficult situation.

Moreover, when I think about a researcher's obligations in regard to research participants, I wonder how the researcher can "repay" them for their help in carrying out scholarly projects. The researcher often takes advantage of their hospitality and occupies their precious time, while offering only interest in return. In reflecting on the benefits research subjects (interlocutors) may derive from cooperation with an anthropologist and noting their secondary nature, Clifford Geertz (2000: 34) pointed out that there could be "a sense of being an essential collaborator in an important, if but dimly understood, enterprise; a pride in one's own culture and in the expertness of one's knowledge of it; a chance to express private ideas and opinions (and retail gossip) to a neutral outsider; as well, again, as a certain amount of direct or indirect material benefit of one sort or another."

In the light of my research experience, the list of benefits that subjects derive from participating in research has changed somewhat, mainly due to changes in the relationship between the researcher and the participants. My interlocutors—who were goal-oriented and often well-educated ethnic leaders—had no difficulty understanding the researcher's undertaking. They were participants in a dialogue, a meeting during which a negotiation of meanings occurred, along with the production of anthropological knowledge, as signaled by Kirsten Hastrup (1995). Moreover, as Ewa Nowicka rightly states (2005: 208), there has been a radical change in the sphere of relations between the researcher and the participants: the researcher "has to deal with a situation of being the subject of political measures, pressure, and even manipulation on the part of the participant." The anthropologist has ceased to be a "provider of trinkets," because participation in research does not involve any material benefit for the subject, while at the same time the leaders of ethnic groups are asking with increasing explicitness how their community will benefit from the presence of researchers. Maybe they do not so much want to restrict access to the group as use

the researchers' skills to their own ends. This is the reason, for example, for their support of all research projects containing a simultaneous revitalization component. The involvement of group members in research translates into support for efforts to preserve or reanimate the group's culture. In addition, ethnic leaders often seek the legitimacy of researchers to legitimize their own actions, and expect engagement and various forms of support from them.

In conducting research, my attitude was one of engagement before I even began to identify it this way. I supported various projects of the Lemko community: I responded to invitations to lecture on the results of my research; I publishing my findings in the ethnic press; I participated in conferences organized by Lemko ethnic organizations. These activities resulted from my sense of obligation to support the diversity of Polish society through engagement in minority issues, but also to "repay" my interlocutors by supporting important initiatives for them.

CONCLUSIONS

In our reflections here, our two voices sometimes coincide due to similar topics, and sometimes diverge, showing differences. We both drew attention to the role of our university training, which during our studies contained rather the suggestion that distancing ourselves was the right attitude in regard to the reality being studied. In our voices, the influence of similar readings and theoretical inspirations can be discerned. We were both influenced by constructivist approaches, symbolic interactionism, and phenomenological and humanistic sociology, which questioned the current positivist paradigm in social research. We were educated in the orbit of qualitative sociology, broadly understood as both specific qualitative methods and the basic assumptions of the main theoretical currents within the interpretive paradigm (Wyka 1990: 171). Our identification with the anthropological discipline, which assumes an emphasis on appreciating differences, and the intellectual climate of those times, which was an important context of our axiological choices, were also not without significance. We shared a tendency to be engaged, though it was not yet a clear, unambiguous position. We also had a polemical approach to the previous ways of describing and interpreting the issues of ethnic minorities in Poland and the image that emerged from the work of researchers exploring the ethnic "field." We both rejected the objectivist paradigm and assimilationist concepts in the study of minorities, openly advocating pluralist approaches.

However, differences also appeared in our narratives due both to the specifics of the communities we studied, which presented us with slightly different hurdles and determined different understandings of engagement, and to the forms our involvement took. The second voice speaks of more activities on behalf of her research subjects. The most important difference was that the community she studied was embroiled in an identity conflict, which generated various challenges and dilemmas for her.

Comparison of different research experiences has led us to reflect more broadly on the issues of ethnic research and the associated challenges and dilemmas of engagement, which can take various forms, ranging from open action for human rights and freedoms, through advocacy for a specific ethnic community, to critical reflection within academe on power relations in the ethnic field. Ethnicity is a sphere of social life with a high degree of politicization, which results on the one hand from its above-mentioned connection with nationalism and the policy of nation states toward ethnic and national minorities—or, more broadly, with the management of cultural diversity—and on the other hand from the fact that as the public sphere became democratized the leaders of ethnic groups began to pursue identity policies and to seek legal recognition, the support of the state, and protection of their identity and culture. Conducting research on ethnic issues is therefore not solely an activity in the academic field but also in the ethnic field, which is strongly politicized. The results of research on ethnic minorities can be, and are, used by the state authorities in accord with their political interest.

It can happen that representatives of the authorities select positions formulated in the scholarly discourse and give them “political significance,” invoking them as the views of experts in order to legitimize policy toward minorities. Especially during periods of growing nationalism, the state authorities may seek to “silence” minority voices and opinions, or to limit minority actions. In such a situation, deliberately chosen arguments from the field of scholarship are invoked in order to support or “cover” the political interests of the authorities in implementing their policy on minorities.

At the same time, the research results are also used by educated, active ethnic leaders, who are fighting in the ethnic or political field for recognition and protection for their group. They often prefer both diverse kinds of self-description for the group and various strategies for maintaining and developing the group culture or identity. This applies to all ethnic groups, not only those divided in terms of identity, although it concerns the latter especially.

How should a researcher behave in such a situation? Looking back, we know that an ethnic researcher has a choice: he or she must be for either engagement or distance. The second attitude, however, does not protect researchers from political entanglement because their works can and are used by various social actors for their own purposes. This deprives researchers of the opportunity to decide on the status of their own products. And although each researcher must make his or her own decision about the strategy to be adopted and thus the risk associated with it, what seems most important is ethical and methodological reflexivity and the awareness that the choices made may have consequences for the well-being of the research subjects, who may be an internally diverse group. Of course, it is possible to point to other, equally politicized, research problems. The issue of entanglement concerns not only ethnic research but the location of the researcher and his or her works in the social world in general. Our experience, however, tells us that in the case of ethnic studies, the choices in regard to engagement, distance, and the involvement of the researcher require special consideration and all the consequences of these decisions need to be taken into account.

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Abstract

This article is a retrospective look at the research experiences of the two authors, who began their study of ethnic issues in Poland at the beginning of the 1990s. They discuss the place and role of the anthropologist in the research process, the social and political context of activities in the field, the researcher's position in relation to the research subjects, power relations, positioning, and the prevailing forms of discourse. Their aim is to show the challenges and dilemmas facing a researcher of ethnic minorities, with the necessity of choosing a strategy of engagement or distance and the consequences of that choice.

key words: history of anthropology in Poland, ethnographic research, engagement of the researcher, advocacy / support for minority groups, political problems of minority groups

DWUGŁOS O ZAANGAŻOWANIU WYZWANIA I DYLEMATY BADACZA ETNICZNOŚCI W POLSCE NA POCZĄTKU LAT DZIEWIĘCDZIESIĄTYCH XX WIEKU

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Abstrakt

Artykuł jest próbą retrospektywnego spojrzenia na doświadczenia badawcze dwóch autorek, które rozpoczęły swe badania nad problematyką etniczną w Pol-

sce na początku lat dziewięćdziesiątych XX wieku. W centrum ich uwagi znajduje się namysł nad miejscem i rolą antropolożki/antropologa w procesie badawczym, społecznymi i politycznymi uwarunkowaniami działań podejmowanych w „terenie”, usytuowaniem w relacji do badanych, pozycjonowaniem, relacjami władzy czy też obowiązującymi formacjami dyskursywnymi. Kluczowe jest ukazanie wyzwań i dylematów, przed jakimi staje badaczka/badacz mniejszości etnicznych — w obliczu wyboru strategii zaangażowania bądź zdystansowania podczas badań oraz konsekwencji dokonywanych wyborów.

słowa kluczowe: historia antropologii w Polsce, badania etnograficzne, zaangażowanie badacza, poparcie grup mniejszościowych, problemy polityczne w grupach mniejszościowych