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Action research in the Vilnius region

Abstract

The author in his text dedicated to action research made in the Vilnius region, Lithuania (a project realized by undergraduate students, PhD students, and one of the employees of the Department of Ethnology and Anthropology University of Wrocław and a Lithuanian partner), presents an approach of engaged anthropology, basing on the characteristics important for it: cooperation, dialogism, openness, voluntariness. The paper presents the main features of the methodology of action research and further – the objectives and results of the research. It describes the cooperation between the academic anthropologists and non-professionals, moreover – the reflections on fieldwork and the problems that researcher has to cope with.

Keywords: action research, engaged anthropology, The Vilnius region, cooperation.

This action research was carried out under the project financed by the Polish-Lithuanian Youth Exchange Fund. Moreover, on the Polish side organizers and participants of the project called *Small pieces, big stories* included ten people associated with Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Wrocław. Similarly, Lithuanian side of the project also consisted of ten people. They were members of a small association – *Lenkų Studentų Klubas Lietuvoje*.

In contrast to the Polish group, who knew anthropological workshop and had earlier participated in the anthropological studies of the field, the Lithuanian group have not gotten anthropological education and experience. However, they were very involved in a social life of the places where the study was conducted. The Lithuanian partners¹ were interested in the subject of the Vilnius region as well as in the subject of anthropology.

Preparations for the action had been initiated one year before the beginning of the project. The members of both groups jointly organized many elements of the whole project. The participants met and started their activities on 12th of October

¹ Using the word “Lithuanian” – in the context of the partnership group involved in this study – I do not mean to their nationality or ethnicity. I am referring only to their citizenship.

2013, and ended on 18th of October 2013. The whole group spent six days together in a small village in the Vilnius region – *Jovariškies*.

The main task of the members of the project was to know the fate of inhabitants of the Vilnius region. The participants of the project examined the Vilnius region in order to understand the way in which the local community looks at the past and modern world. The nationality of the interlocutor was not significant. The main aim of the project was to learn what is common for the people living in this region. The project focused on conversations with the local community. The participants of the project were divided into nine, double groups.² In those groups, one person was a citizen of Lithuania and the other one of Poland. As good starting points for many conversations were stories about things. Those things for various reasons seemed to be important for our interlocutors. Another objective of the project was to understand and integrate the project participants. Activities that at its core were constructed to join both sides of the project and, thus, facilitating the process of integration. The whole project was planned in such a way that all the participants were able to perform as many activities as possible together.

The idea of realization of the action research appeared much later than the idea of the project. Initially, the main objective was to undertake the integration project. At the same time, this initiative did not rule out the realization of the action research. As mentioned in the introduction to this article, the project was financed by the Polish-Lithuanian Youth Exchange Fund. According to John Bennett, in the case of research funding by external institutions, it should be classified as applied research (Bennett 2010: 297–324). In this context, it is important to identify the reason why researches financed by external funds are perceived as action researches. This explanation shall be clearer if we precede it with short information about the Polish-Lithuanian Youth Exchange Fund.

Polish-Lithuanian Youth Exchange Fund is an institution founded on June 1, 2007 under the agreement between Polish Government and Government of the Republic of Lithuania, and under the patronage of Prime Ministers of both countries. The Fund supports financially and substantively different youth initiatives and its primary goal is to integrate young people from Poland and Lithuania. More specific objectives of the fund are: the development of international relations, inspiring young people to be active, exploring common roots and eliminating some prejudices and stereotypes that occur between the Polish and Lithuanian citizens.

As we can see, the Fund's priorities are very general. It does not preclude a simultaneous accomplishment of the project and action research. At the same time, there has not been a situation in which the Fund would have expected concrete

² One group consisted of four people. The proportions are retained – two persons were from Poland and two persons were from Lithuania.

results of the research which undoubtedly would bring such a project closer to applied research. The Fund does not try – with their activities – to check the specific programs that could in any way affect the local community. Projects are launched as a result of the agreement between the participants. Participants determine the shape and the object of their activities between themselves. Therefore, there is no situation in which it would be possible to introduce a centrally planned change in local communities (Carr 2010: 31–32).

It should be noted that the fund is not an institution which finds a project strictly anthropological. There are no situations – typical of applied anthropology – in which, because of the payment by an external institution, researchers need to adapt to the requirements of their employer. Therefore, action research – carried out under the projects implemented by the fund – can be conducted without external pressure which may affect the nature of the activities carried out under the project. There is no risk that external interest of the fund may be more important than the goals and methods of action research. Although the Polish-Lithuanian Youth Exchange Fund is not involved in financing anthropological projects, its activity allows organizing action research. Action research can be both anthropological practice and the projects which assume integration between the Polish and Lithuanian youth.

The next part of the article shall present action research characteristics occurring in the project *Small pieces, big stories*. Firstly, attention will be paid to the effects of changes cause by the action research. Secondly, voluntary and community involved in the project will be characterized. Subsequently, the paper will present the role of unity, theory, and practice in the project.

At first, the changes appeared in the absence of “objective-personal” perspective between the members of the research (Kemmis 2010: 81). Both groups participated in the research process. The examples are the situations in which, despite the methodological preparation of anthropologists to talk to people, the people from Lithuania, because of their knowledge of the local realities, asked questions that were more precise. The researchers were equal to each other and thus they could get a better effect of the conversation. Many times, there were situations in which the anthropologists asked about the conflicts that have existed between the nations – Polish and Lithuanian. Often, the local community was answering reluctantly to such questions, indicating that there are no existing conflicts. A pair of researchers faced such situations in a small village, near Trakai. During a conversation with a big family, an anthropologist tried to initiate the discussion concerning the conflicts between the Polish and Lithuanian youth. A question whether there are any conflicts at schools between the two national groups received a negative response. Yet, the Lithuanian partner, who joined the conversation, noted that at his school during breaks the two national groups often spend time

separately. Such a comment significantly changed the course of the conversation. People opened up and told an interesting story:

It so happened that the older brother was sent by his parents to the Lithuanian school, and the younger to the Polish. With shouts to “beat Lithuanian” and “mušk Lenka” (“beat the Pole!”) they moved on the head boys divisions. One was Kozłowski and a second Kozlausakas. Apparently the confusion in the names threatened harsh quarrel. But it did not disturb brothers: Pole and a Lithuanian, living side by side, spending holidays together and keeping their children for baptism (Oleksy 2012: 35).

In this case, the question asked by a person from the ‘local world’ increased the level of trust among inhabitants and thus made it possible to carry out an interesting conversation.

Questions asked by a local researcher, in a sense, legitimized the opportunity to talk about various problems by the local community. Due to the presence of the people from the local environment, the answers to many questions were offered much more likely and with more details. The presence of a Lithuanian partner was particularly visible during the early stages of discussions with the local community. Conversations were initiated in many situations not by the anthropologists but by their partners. As one of anthropologist said, “in the field my partner helped me many times to arrange Lithuanians who were our interlocutors”. Another example would be a situation in which people were reluctant to polish anthropologists. Only the presence of Lithuanian participants enabled them to gain information.

The following situation occurred in the Old Trakai. In this small town there is the Catholic Church, which several years ago was destined for the French monastery for nuns. The presence of nuns did not meet with a positive reception from the local community. The Poles, who inhabit bigger part of the village, spoke uncomplimentary about the adaptation of the Catholic Church to the monastery. As one of the anthropologists reported:

We went to the nuns, thinking that they would not want to talk to us. It turned out that the nuns did not speak Polish. If it had not been for our Lithuanian partner we would have had to leave our interlocutors and go away with all the arguments in our heads [heard from the local community] about the duplicity of nuns. [Lithuanian partner] adopted the role of an interpreter, the nuns let us into the church. They responded to all the question and mentioned that they would study Polish to work voluntarily in the village. If she [the Lithuanian partner] had not been with us probably we would have seen only one side of the coin of social contacts in the village.

Those examples illustrate an important role of the Lithuanian partners in the research. The situation was made possible by the elimination of objective-personal relationships, which characterizes action research. Researchers were equal partners (Cherns *et al.* 1976: 33). To describe equal partners proportionally we should also indicate the role of anthropologists in those action researches.

As mentioned earlier, the methodological preparation of anthropologists turned out to be significant. They had experience gained during earlier research-

es. The Lithuanian partners translated anthropologist's questions in a kind way focusing on the most important things in a conversation. As one of the Lithuanian research participants noted, the presence of an anthropologist and his sophistication in the field helped in the construction of the conversation. This was confirmed by the situation in which researchers tried to find out if there were some folk stories about a specific behavior during the storm. Initially, inhabitants wondered for a long time. They said that they did not know any typical behavior. Only when the anthropologist suggested that they light candles or place them in the windows, they recalled a whole range of practices performed for safety during the storm. In this case, the experience gained from earlier anthropological research made it possible to get interesting ethnographic material.

The Lithuanian partners also noted that during discussions with the local community in some cases anthropologist's nationality was important. High, in terms of quantity, the Polish minority living in the Vilnius region was very happy to establish contact with their compatriots visiting this part of the Lithuania. One of the Lithuanian partners pointed out that the presence of anthropologists helped because the people with whom conversations were conducted "especially of the Polish origin – were more likely to hold talks due to the presence of Polish compatriots. This gave the local community a lot of satisfaction, because they had the honor to host Polish students at home".

The role of both researchers during the research was significant. It is impossible to attempt to assess which researcher had a greater impact on the research. The Lithuanian partners, as people from the "inside" of the environment, greatly increased the confidence of the local community. Often, the conversations could be only started due to Lithuanian partners' intervention. The partners had multi-contextual knowledge about the Vilnius region and they could ask questions that were more precise. Their fluency in Lithuanian was also significant and in various realities facilitated the conversations. No less important in the research were the anthropologists. Their participation allowed the conversations not to deviate from the previously established theme. Ethnographic knowledge also allowed for a broader view of some aspects of the culture of Vilnius. Thereby, a better understanding of some problems was possible. nationality of the anthropologists was also important – this factor often facilitated conversations with the Polish minority in the Vilnius region.

The second category of changes occurring during the action research was connected directly to the research participants themselves. Transformation is an element of ideological perspectives of research participants – their views and assessment (Czerpaniak-Walczak 2005: 82). During action research implemented under the project *Small pieces, big stories* the changes of this type occurred in two ways. The first referred to the anthropologists, the second referred to the Lithuanian partners. The changes which are related the anthropologists are associated with the nature of their research. In many cases, it transformed both: the practice of their research and their thinking about some of the research problems in Vilnius region. The changes which concerned the Lithuanian partners were based

on self-reflection. The issues that seemed to be obvious through research became more complex.

Attention will be paid to the issues associated with the anthropologist's changes. Some of them had already had the opportunity to conduct the field research in Vilnius region. For others, problems and the diversity of this area were a completely new experience. Therefore, the changes varied.

As an experienced anthropologist noted: "Certainly, the presence of [a Lithuanian partner] showed me that I can see the 'research problems' where she cannot see them, it convinced me that the research problems are highly intersubjective creation". Such a reflection is very valuable for the anthropologist not only in the context of the specific studies but also in the context of individual research practice. Defining the research problem as a kind of construct seems to be an issue well developed in the anthropological literature (Hammersley, Atkinson 2000: 34–64). However, only the experience in a particular situation in the field allows the translation of theoretical issues into our own research practice. Research carried out together with a partner who does not have an anthropological education is a good opportunity for the anthropologist to become aware of his role in the research and his potential to impact specific results of the research.

The presence of a Lithuanian partner during action research changed also another important element of the research. Anthropologists had the opportunity to realize that their theories or assumptions represented do not always adequately explain the various phenomena and the processes occurring in the social reality. To the question if "the presence of the Lithuanian partner changed something in your research practice?", one of the anthropologists said "ethnologists do not have a monopoly to ask questions and it happens that our theoretical assumptions (I started my research after reading many books about research on an everyday life, including the works on practices of cooking) limited our actions". Theoretical support does not always need to be preferred for the research. Of course, I should not, to a large degree, discredit the role of a theory when conducting research in a field. However, it is important to pay attention to the fact that theory cannot override real problems in the community. Similar conclusions were reached by another anthropologist, who noted that "the presence of [a Lithuanian partner] and the act of talking to him warned me against over-interpretation of words or events, I did not granted them additional meaning because he [Lithuanian partner] often came down to what people have said to more mundane matters."

The anthropologists who had already conducted research in the Vilnius region, once again met with the issues specific for this area. Changes in their research practices were associated with understanding that repeating research in a similar environment may result in creation of a schematic approach to the research. This means that it is easy in this case to replace the actual research problems by previously constructed opinions. This problem was well described by one of the researcher who have had many opportunities to conduct research in the Vilnius region.

During the research conducted in the area of Trakai I realized that some topics are so clear for us that we fall into a routine very quickly (assuming that we are collecting material "in the field", we

are repeating research themes, in other words, they are not new for us). The presence of people – not ethnologists, makes it possible for us see this routine during the research.

This routine can have a negative impact on research because it simplifies some of the issues and brings them to a common denominator, despite the fact that those issues do not fit together. It is also important that some of the problems apparently seem to be obvious to the anthropologist – during research they turned out to be much more complicated. Through cogitative look at some of the issues, it was possible to see their diversity while understanding their tendency for simplification and generalization.

After analyzing the anthropologist's changes, we should take a closer look at the changes – made through action research – that appeared among the Lithuanian partners. A significant change was associated with the issue of the perception of their identity. Before participating in the study the Lithuanian partners have not wondered about their identity in such categories as the anthropologists did.³ As one of the Lithuanian partner mentioned: "I remember that conversation in Trakai, when I joined you in the cafe. We talked about issues related to identity. After this conversation, I thought more about my membership to the Polish or Lithuanian nation. This conversation encouraged internal reflections." Thanks to this situation these anthropologists in a conversation with the local community focused on identity issues and Lithuanian partners began thinking in similar categories. Thus, a reflection of their identity has become multi-contextual.

In such a multicultural area as the Vilnius region, the category of the identity seems to be very fluid and difficult to define. An attempt to classify to which nation an individual belongs seems to be, in many cases, impossible to achieve. Therefore – without explicit courts – anthropological analysis seems to be a good tool for taking as difficult topic as identity problem in the multicultural reality. All this has caused changes in thinking about their identity by Lithuanian partners. Firstly, the aforementioned anthropological concept of identity strongly affected the Lithuanian partners. To the question of whether the participation in those action researches had changed something in their perceiving Vilnius, one of the Lithuania participants answered:

It is a matter of identity. It was interesting that each caller defines its identity in his own way. Zofia said that if the family is mixed, for example the Polish-Lithuanian, a child chooses their nationality themselves – if they want be a Pole or a Lithuanian. Another person told us that it is not important from which area or state you come from, the most important is who you think you are, what traditions you grow up with, what language you use. All those thoughts are very accurate. It all depends on the person, rather than on what others say.

³ I am referring to a category of identity expressed by J. Assmann, "*Identity We or collective as an image of itself that builds community and with whom its members identify. Collective identity is a matter of identification on the part of individuals. It does not exist in itself but only in the extent that some individuals express it*" (Straub 2006: 1133).

In the above quotation, in addition to issues of identity, we can also look at the topic related to the problem of making a clear and general thesis in a very diverse reality. As it was noted by one of the participants: "I have understood that you cannot think everything is black or white and it is impossible to describe the Vilnius region in one book."

After analyzing different types of changes that were results of the project, attention will be paid to another elements of characteristic of action research. Those issues are a community and a voluntary. Those categories appeared in various forms during the project *Small pieces, big stories*.

The community and voluntary nature of the action research was expressed mainly in the relations between the researcher and the person defined as a "person being tested." As it was mentioned, this relationship was characterized by a reduction or even extinction of objective-personal relationship. This situation occurred during the action research. From the beginning to the end of the project, none of the groups wanted to to be exalted because of their knowledge or skills. Knowledge was not the most important element of hierarchisation of the group. Instead, both groups tried to pass the most important information. Due to the joint action based mainly on the discussions with the local community – both, the anthropologists and Lithuanian participants in many cases equally engaged in their activities. They had a different kind of competence – therefore their partnership was extremely valuable.

Another important feature includes the category of community and voluntary that characterized action research and its openness (Kemmis, McTaggart 2010: 787). In this research, the openness of the local community had a very high value. The described action research was based on the conversations with the representatives of the local community so they were co-created by those communities. It should be noted that in research many various people were involved from the local environment. This situation arose because the pair that carried out the research did it independently from each other and they rarely encountered the same participants. Therefore, issues and topics of conversation were varied. As a result, the publication which is the result of the research has multi-contextual nature and it describes various problems of the Vilnius region.

Engaging next persons from the local environment positively influenced the research. Close relations of the researchers with the representatives of the community sensitized the latter to the issues directly related to Vilnius. Through this, they could get more involved in their research and thus the material collected by them could be more precise and detailed. The situations in which inhabitants were very interested in the activities of the anthropologists and their Lithuanian partners are the examples of such approach. Questions that they asked to the project participants caused the conversation to get unilateral character. The dialogue was

possible during which there was not a typical relation for classical anthropological research: “informant” – “questioner” (Hammersley, Atkinson 2000: 107–112). That opposition has been replaced by a partnership relation in which both sides participate on an equal footing.

During the project *Small pieces, big stories* cooperation was manifested on several different levels. Firstly, the joint action appeared in everyday situations such as preparing meals or leisure. Secondly, cooperation took place long before the direct implementation of the project. This was associated with the preparation of the whole project. Thirdly, an important type of cooperation took place at the stage of the common research, while research material was collected, analyzed and during the process of writing the article. It is hard to decide which type of cooperation brought the best results for the participants of the project. This issue depends on the individual convictions of the members of the project.

As it was previously indicated, understanding the perspective of other people is a value of action research. This is possible because getting to know other people's opinions expands our horizons. In other words, a relation that comprises cooperation allows multicontextual look at some issue. Through the action with the partner, one is able not only to know their practices, but also – and perhaps above all – has the possibility to know oneself. Presented aspects in which there was a cooperation refer to many various situations. The common denominator in each case is the presence of the relationship between the anthropologists and the participants from the Lithuania. This contact is particularly important because it allows the creation of a relationship of trust which plays an important role in the whole process of action research.

Trust occurring between the partners has an important impact on action research. It is associated with ethical issues, appearing in many other types of anthropological research. Thanks to trust, it was possible to change the “ethical perspective” (Pink 2009: 77). Through this action, the research could be based on the principles of partnership. This means that the individual values considered by both anthropologists and Lithuanian participants were not obstacles in the common action. These values did not create conflicts. In greater extent, they were associated with partnership activity which aimed at achieving common goals.

The last category characterizes action research express in the unity of theory and practice. This issue appeared also in the initiative *Small pieces, big stories*. Comorbidity of theory and practice is one of the most important features that makes it possible to analyze this project in terms of action research (Czerpaniak-Walczak 2005: 80–82).

From the beginning both groups – anthropologists and Lithuanian participants – decided that the conversations with the local community would be focused on the “things”. It means that these talks were to focus on things important for the local community in order to be able to talk about the stories of the family. This type of research in anthropology is a well-known method (Barański 2007; Kopytoff 2005: 252; Krajewski 2008: 149). It was necessary to remember that the Lithuanian partners were not able to prepare from the theoretical side of this re-

search. This was a reason why anthropologists had to introduce their partners to the most important issues about the theoretical aspects of the “anthropology of things”.

After first conversations with the local community, it turned out that during the interviews theoretical preparation was not the most important aspect. This was because the most important aim of the project was to prove that the anthropological “thinking through the things” really finds its examples in situations occurring in the Vilnius region. The priority for the whole group was to collect interesting stories and events from the life of the local communities, which in turn would describe the nature of the Vilnius region. At the time when the theoretical approach was applied in the practice, it turned out that it is difficult to find some elements that would confirm the discussion.

Practice have constantly interfered in the theory, for example, in the way of asking questions, or in the way of conducting discussions with the participants of the study. An important element favorably affected the quality of the whole initiative, daily evaluation meetings. During the meetings, all the participants of the project discussed together the events of the day. Each pair had time to present their achievements. These meetings had a significant value – at least for two reasons. Firstly, each participant could summarize their achievements and thus pay attention to the fact that the changes had to be made before the next conversations with the local community. On the other hand, the meeting was important for the whole group. It happened because at the forum discussed were topics important for all participants. Everyone could take the floor, and – most importantly – everyone could make a reflection on their practice. This situation allowed changing their own practices – both among the Lithuanian group and among the anthropologists.

The unity of theory and practice, in the action research, was expressed in the final effects of the whole project. As already mentioned, the original aim of the research was to focus on the specific things. Evaluation of the research practice revised this plans. The articles, which are the results of this action research, contain information about the things important for some conversations. It should be noted that most of these things are the background for the whole story. During the research, we found that asking questions about specific things did not work as we expected. Thus, on some evaluation meetings, was made the change in the way of conducting conversations. Not only were the questions asked to the local community transformed but also the way of shaping the nature and purpose of a specific research. The practice highly developed the theory. The project *Small pieces, big stories*, which linked theory and practice, enabled to achieve better results of the research than it would be in a situation in which researchers would try to achieve their theoretical assumptions prepared outside of the context defined by a field.

Another example pointing to a strong connection between theory and practice during the research is their situational character (Somekh 2006: 27). This means that the results of these studies may relate only to the specific situation and refer only to the specific environment. You cannot move the results of this research – *de facto* changes – to another research situation. The changes that have occurred

in the anthropologists and Lithuanian participants are appropriate only for describing actions. In any other situation, it would be different. Knowledge which was created through research is contextual and it depends on performing during specific time practice. Also rating action research should have of hermeneutical nature. This means that during the analysis of the research one should take into account the complexity of the problem. The environment in which research is conducted – according to an external observer – should not be generalized.

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