
ECONOMICS

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ETHICAL PROBLEMS OF THE SOCIOLOGISTS PROFESSION. POLISH PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT. The sociologists professional ethics defines the rules of the sociologists professional activities. Observing moral standards is an expression of care not only for the sociologists common good, but also for the society common good as the society is examined by the sociologists and the society uses and benefits from the research results. Society expects that sociologists will be highly qualified, will perfect their skills and improve their expertise as well as keep high ethical standards. The basic duty of every sociologist is not to harm the participants, but to protect their rights, interests, sensitivity and privacy. Coming across different people and social groups, a sociologist should rely on ethical rules as they guarantee the observance of civil and human rights. The researchers cannot use their authority to support particular people, political parties or groups, because such researchers will be seen as uncritical apologists of particular groups of power or interest. Sociologists who conduct research are under an obligation to carry it out in a way that does not raise either reservations or suspicions of impartiality. Only solid research conducted by reliable sociologists deserve to be acknowledged, and if such sociologists opinions are unbiased, they will be accepted and positively appraised. The article is an analysis of the subject with using available literature.

JEL Classification: Z1**Keywords:** sociology, ethical problems, research, polish perspective, profession.

Introduction

Contemporary sociological studies are utilitarian, as a matter of fact, because many people and institutions use information collected by the sociologists during empirical research. The ways this knowledge is used are of dual character. Some results serve the public welfare, especially solving difficult social problems, while other serve particular purposes by methods of social engineering. Gaining knowledge about a society becomes a very important and responsible task, so social research should be based on specific ethical standards.

The range of a sociologist interests is wide and diverse. It includes various social processes, groups and communities, organizations, society institutions etc. A sociologist tries to decipher relations and connections between people, and is also interested in the activities of

social institutions. Studying a social sciences makes student able to determine their status and the dynamics of change as well as propose effective methods of obviating irregularities which may hamper the society's functioning. In a way, a sociologist becomes a society's physician, examining the society and social phenomena, and diagnosing social problems that have to be solved.

Obviously, a sociologist interest in a society and direct contact with another participants of society requires observing high professional standards. Both the professional prestige and scientific value of their research depend on it. The broad range of research problems investigated by the sociologists affects the complexity and intricacy of ethical dilemmas stemming from the profession's specificity.

The fundamental aim of this paper is to present selected ethical problems of the sociologists profession. Hitherto, the professional literature has not noted a comprehensive monograph on the axiology of a sociologist work. However, in various publications, there are references to ethical issues which apply to sociological research conducting.

Contemporary sociological discussion develops toward the analysis of ethical issues with the interface of new media and social engineering. The development of new technology also allows the researcher to explore previously unknown issues. Interesting from the point of view of the researcher is to understand the principles of social science understood as the relationship between IT in the communication process and social world. In the process of investigation of this phenomenon on the one hand research interest is the impact of IT in communication for social and psychological changes among the people that use them. On the other hand, the effects of social phenomena in information and communication systems. The first definition of the phenomenon created by Rob Kling recognizing that "the social IT refers to the study of social aspects of computing, including the role of information technology in social and organizational changes, use of information technology in a social context and the ways in which power and social practices impact on social organization of work with information technologies" (Kling, 2000).

Today, social IT can be understood as an interdisciplinary research area at the intersection of computer science and the social sciences. In this second context, mention should be noted that social IT is the field of modern social sciences, such as sociology and psychology of the Internet. In this aspect, the social sciences, providing a large number of behavioural data on social behaviour can be described as the methodological revolution Computational Social Science (Cioffi-Revilla, 2010). For a systematic description of the research conducted by social IT is useful to introduce the term information system understood as the digitally stored information and this information processing processes (Mackay, 2013), and the social system, understood as the human community and the occurring in the social processes (Sztompka, 1999). Relations between the social system and the information system (including the Internet) are complex and extensive. However, in order to facilitate and systematize the discussion from the perspective of social science, we can focus on the relationships that create (produce) or use (consume) information (Robey, Asvendo, 2002).

In connection with the above, the author of this paper analyzed selected ethical problems which are related to a sociologist work, and have a significant impact on the quality of conducted research and on the attitude towards people connected with the research. While preparing this elaboration, literature related to the problem and known to the author was used.

1. Sociologist – participants relations

A sociologist has expertise to examine the structure, development and forms of a society, and relations within the society. The environment of a sociologist work depends on the specificity of performed duties. A sociologist should enjoy public trust with regard to their

essential role played within society. During research, a sociologist has access to confidential information on the private lives of participants, which cannot be revealed. What is more, the research results are not only the source of information, but also effect the society. It is true especially of information transmitted by the media to the public opinion and based on the results of various opinion polls which, according to scientific studies, affect the recipients' views, beliefs and values. For this reason, only a sociologist with high ethical standards is a reliable society explorer worthy of public confidence (Turner, 1998, pp. 37-38; Sztumski, 2005, pp. 31-33).

One method of revising status quo and enhancing sociologists moral conduct is creating a set of rules and guidelines in the sociologists code of professional conduct. These instructions guard the profession's prestige and indicate how its representatives should and should not behave. In order to assess a deed as morally right or wrong, the sociologists should refer to a particular moral standard which is a criterion of their professional conduct. The professional ethics of sociologists, through determining normative issues which apply to specific model situations, gives the grounds for establishing rules of a sociologist social and professional functioning. Professional ethics is a set of guidelines which are a specified version of general moral standards, as they describe detailed behaviour in typical situations a sociologist can find oneself. Detailed ethical standards refer to the attitude towards the profession, the quality of performed work, merits, discipline and job efficiency (Lazari-Pawłowska, 1971, p. 62; Sułek, Świniarski, 2001, pp. 63-64, 76-79; Teichman, 2002, pp. 126-130).

The sociologists code of professional conduct enhances the profession's prestige as well as recognition and public trust. It is also a specific protection against social pressure, because the rules clearly state what the society can demand from the sociologists. The code helps the sociologists properly perform their work and is a point of reference while adjudicating moral dilemmas (Kodeks Etyki Socjologa/ the Sociologists Professional Ethics Code, 2012, Preambuła/Preamble).

A sociologist, when exploring various dimensions and problems of social life, usually encounters another human beings directly. Coming across different people and social groups, a sociologist should obey moral rules as they guarantee the observance of civil and human rights. A sociologist should also protect the interest of people who participate in the sociologist work or whom the work concerns. It spells knowing and observing the law in force, especially those regulations which can affect the research, data publication and storage, results publication, as well as those which refer to the rights of participants, sponsors, employers and other parties (the Sociologists Professional Ethics Code, 2012, p. 4).

A sociologist conducting research should account for the consequences of their work, or of improper results application, for the participants and other interested parties. It is possible if a sociologist responsibly uses collected data and anticipates the consequences of publicizing research results. This duty cannot be omitted even in the face of a difficult situation, especially a conflict of social interests or an unexpected improper use of research and its results by a third party (the Sociologists Professional Ethics Code, 2012, p. 6. See: Komitet Etyki w Nauce/ Committee of Ethics in Science, 1994, pp. 7-8).

The basic duty of a researcher is not to harm the participants, but to protect their rights, interests, privacy and sensitivity. It is feasible if a sociologist acquaints the participants with the subject of research in an intelligible and understandable manner, reveals the entity responsible for the research, and explains how the results will be used and publicized. Conducting research is usually connected with an interference in a respondent's private life. Depending on the subject of research, a sociologist may expect a participant to reveal private, often confidential and sensitive information which are sometimes unknown even to the nearest and dearest. A respondent is then in a state of mental distress, because they have to

reveal their beliefs, opinions or values to a complete stranger. Regardless of the kind of conducted research, a sociologist should always inform a participant that they have a right to refuse to participate in the research or to resign at every stage of the research without giving a reason. If a respondent voluntarily and consciously agrees to take part in the research, a sociologist should treat them in an honest, unbiased, responsible and trustworthy way. It is the researcher's duty to anticipate and protect the participants against harmful consequences, especially when children, the elderly, the disabled or mentally ill are participating in the research (the Sociologists Professional Ethics Code, 2012, pp. 7-16. See: Babbie, 2004, pp. 515-516; Committee of Ethics in Science, 1994, p. 11).

A sociologist should guarantee the participants with the highest possible level of privacy, confidentiality or anonymity. The principle of anonymity is obeyed when not only people acquainted with the research results, but also the researcher has no means to identify the authors of particular statements. Whereas, within the guaranty of confidentiality, a sociologist can identify a respondent, but is obliged not to reveal certain information or not to indicate the connection to the person. That is why, both the respondents' personal details and collected empirical data, especially sensitive information, should be properly secured and stored. Properly secured and stored means that no unauthorised person should be able to access collected data. It is advised to use such techniques of anonymity protection which make it impossible to establish any relation between the data and the respondent. There is less requirements regarding the guaranty of privacy or confidentiality when public organizations, government units, clerks or agencies are involved. However, if the guaranty was given, it should be observed, unless an obvious and vital public interest supports renunciation. Nowadays, the Internet is a specific research field, so a sociologist exploring the worldwide web should get acquainted with the Internet research ethics (the Sociologists Professional Ethics Code, 2012, pp. 19-23; Babbie, 2004, pp. 518-520; Committee of Ethics in Science, 1994, p. 11).

A source of fundamental ethical and legal problems is unobtrusive research, as it is conducted without the participants' knowledge and consent. These methods are inconsistent with the rule of informed consent and can violate the respondents' privacy. However, sometimes, carrying out such research is justified by the scientific significance of an explored social phenomenon which cannot be examined in any other way. A sociologist can meet difficulties when trying to officially explore certain groups or circles, because they are beyond the sociologist reach for various reasons. Conducting an unobtrusive research is also advisable when a sociologist has a well-grounded presumption that the participants will change their behaviour once they know they are examined. The participants of a disguised observation behave naturally and do not tend to adapt their behaviour to the observer's expectations. The Sociologists Professional Ethics Code, which is in force in Poland, allows conducting unobtrusive research provided that: "A participant and non-participant observation in a non-public space without the knowledge of participants, as well as disguised experimental research, should be conducted only when other methods are not sufficient to collect basic data [...]. During such research, the anonymity of participants ought to be protected" (the Sociologists Professional Ethics Code, 2012, pp. 17-18; Babbie, 2004, p. 520).

2. A sociologist independence in creating and publicizing knowledge

It is the duty of a sociologist conducting research to carry it out in a way that will not raise reservations or arouse suspicion of partiality. All prepared research tools should comply with particular scientific standards. The questions that the respondents are asked have to be intelligible and cannot allude answers. The way the questions are asked, the selection of their content from a point of view of an unobtrusive critic or fan of a given social phenomenon, and

where they are placed in a questionnaire – all these factors play an important role in the research process. It is the researcher's duty to select a representative research sample according to the subject of research. If this condition is not met, it can be presumed that the method used contains an element of partiality or is an indication of unprofessionalism. The results of sociological research can be affected by the interviewer, that is the sociologist conducting own or commissioned research. The interviewer selects the respondents, arranges interviews, decides on how the questions are asked and answers registered. It is the interviewer's duty to stay unbiased and not to affect the respondents' answers. However, if the interviewer allows for the expectations and attitudes of research centres or clients, and suggests the answers to the respondents, it is an obvious breach of ethical rules. This dirty business is affecting the results of opinion polls and is very hard to detect in view of the respondents' anonymity (Sulek, 1990, pp. 51-59; Idem, 2002, pp. 55-61; Krimsky, 2006, p. 216; Dyoniziak, 2004, pp. 28-29, 102-104; Jedynek, 2010, p. 15).

A great threat to the impartiality of research is the connection between science and business, politics, ideology. Such connections appear in research and scientific centres, among the employees. Some researchers betray common rules of scientific work and try to combine research with reaping benefits for themselves or for the research unit they work for. In reality, the want to make money on selling and commercializing knowledge does not contribute to the development of science, but hampers it and even discredits. Partiality deriving from the intention to please a sponsor or client is unobtrusive so it is a great menace to science. Sheldon Krimsky (2006) thinks that ambiguous connection between science and business interferes with the pursuit of truth and poses a threat to the science autonomy: "Science supported by private money is not transparent. Not all of the projects and plans are disclosed. Many scientists, whose research is funded by private companies, know exactly what results will satisfy the sponsors and positively affect their financial gain. If a scientist is dependent on a company, then research findings will probably favour the company's interest and the scientist will profit from another grant. It is not a rare thing for a scientist to adopt the interest of a company and make it one's own" (Krimsky, 2006, p. 218. See: Sulek, 1990, pp. 53-54; Idem, 2002, p. 56; Goode, Hatt, 1965, pp. 69-70).

Also, Janusz Sztumski (2005) points to the problem of the commercialization influence on the researchers' behaviour and attitudes. According to Sztumski, it does not matter whether the research sponsor is public or private, there will always appear more or less articulated postulates or demands addressed to the researchers. Not every sponsor is a disinterested science benefactor and some sponsors insist on conducting research that allow for their interests. Being aware of such demands causes the researchers who conduct sponsored or commissioned research to please the sponsors or clients by delivering results consistent with their expectations (Sztumski, 2005, p. 30. See: Silverman, 2008, p. 283).

An expert scientist can find oneself in a similar situation, being characterized by two relations: (1) with the client and (2) with various social groups interested in solving given problem with regard for their own interests. If a scientist wants to please the client or yields to the client's demands, the scientist becomes "a screen shielding the client's activities". Sometimes, the client, in order to authenticate own rationale, appoints only those "experts who can be trusted that their statement will confirm the client's intentions and will keep an appearance of a scientific justification". Then, there may appear "accusations that the scientists become courtiers giving obliging opinions" (Szczepański, 1991, p. 238).

A sociologist should not avoid difficult or politically incorrect subjects of research. For example, in Poland, many opinion polls on political parties support (the so-called election forecasts) are conducted, and most of them are of no use to an average citizen, while many important social issues – like corruption, the impunity of swindlers, administration insufficiency, the status of healthcare, the effects of unemployment, the growing rate of

juvenile delinquency – are ignored. According to Ryszard Dyoniziak, in Poland, the lack of proper criticism and professionalism brings about many “naive and incorrect opinion polls conducted by morally and professionally under-qualified people guided by an urge to get rich (e.g. by creating a marketing campaign) or by propaganda reasons in favour of particular political or interest groups” (Dyoniziak, 2004, pp. 11-12. See: the Sociologists Professional Ethics Code, 2012, p. 3; Committee of Ethics in Science, 1994, pp. 10-11).

In Poland, for several years, the results of opinion polls on politicians and political parties support raise distrust and suspiciousness. Polish distance themselves from election forecasts as they often witness astonishing discrepancies between the alleged public support stated by the research centres, and the actual results of parliamentary or presidential elections. The “mistakes” of some election forecasts come up to 30%, which makes all the criticism justified. Opinion polls not only inform, but also shape certain social behaviour, affecting the recipients’ outlook. When opinion polls results are publicized, e.g. in the media, not only the society learn about itself, but also the information affects public opinion. A message that the majority of voters support a particular political party or its representatives can be a good enough reason for some citizens to change their own opinion on the matter. So, various clients and sponsors of research are intent upon a researcher who allows for their informal expectations on particular goals of political marketing. In such situation, there is a real danger that while caring about their private interest, the public opinion research companies will strive for the clients’ favour in order to receive further orders, guided by the rule “not to bite the hand that feeds you”. This co-operation, harmful to both science and society, may effect in modelling the research results in accordance with the expectations of sponsors. Often, in one week, the media present a couple of election forecasts which vary greatly although they all answer to the same question. The scientific value of such research is rightly considered as dubious, and this poll as well as scientific chaos may result in the sociological research disgrace (Dyoniziak, 2004, pp. 10, 18, 30-35; Krimsky, 2006, p. 218; Sułek, 1990, p. 34).

A great example of poll chaos was an extremely intensive critic of the quality and reliability of polls conducted before the 2010 presidential election in Poland. The fair game for criticism was the work of institutions which, while conducting the research at the same time and on the same subject, achieved very different poll results. The validity of election forecasts founded on these research and compared to the actual election result was controversial. In order to assess the work of research companies and explain the opinion polls results discrepancies, a special team of scientists was established (*Ocena metodologii i rezultatów badań*, 2010, pp. 5-69).

The sociologists, who share the results of their own research with various institutions, including the media, for publication, should be aware of the danger of distortion, simplification and manipulation which for different reasons may appear when presenting the results to public opinion. If such negative actions take place, the researcher are obliged to act in order to correct the misunderstandings and distortions caused by improper results use (the Sociologists Professional Ethics Code, 2012, p. 41).

The relationship between a sociologist and the entities financing research is described in the Sociologists Professional Ethics Code. Its first sentence referring to this issue states that a common cause for the co-operating entities should be sociological inquiry aimed at knowledge development. Aspiring to the highest professional standards should exclude gaining private profit and establishing mutual obligations. Sociologists cannot make promises and accept terms which violate their professional ethics and research obligations. In no circumstances should they accept the terms of agreement which depend on the collected data and results of the commissioned research. To determine the status of a social phenomenon, it is very important to select the best research method. It is the sociologist job as it requires certain professional qualifications. A properly chosen research method makes it easy to

discover the truth and reveal the actual scale and form of the explored phenomenon. But if the research is biased, a method may be chosen which will not give reliable results (e.g. it will be selected by the financing entity). All methods and procedures used to collect publicized data cannot be concealed. A sociologist has to present his research techniques and share the descriptions of both procedures and sources on which the research results are founded with other researchers. The rule of maximum openness – despite a possible conflict of interests – also applies to the sources of sociological research funding (the Sociologists Professional Ethics Code, 2012, pp. 24-33, 38; Committee of Ethics in Science, 1994, p. 11).

Another important ethical problem, concerning the work of a sociologist, is the *opinion-maker effect*¹. Many sociologists are openly content to appear in the media, presenting their opinions and commenting on various social facts. However, in some cases, it is hard to believe in impartiality and objectivity of their analyses. The media usually have the use of a few regulars, acquainted sociologists-experts, giving them a room for interpretational abuse. If a sociologist identifies oneself permanently with a specific political group and with a chosen ideology, then it is hard to believe in the sociologist research and scientific independence. The comments of some sociologists on social facts can be foretold as they reflect these sociologists political and world view. Such people select facts or statistical data in a biased manner, and then interpret them according to established presumptions. When discussing opinion polls, such statements, depending on the situation, can either authenticate and strengthen the polls results or diminish and undermine their value. It is hard not to think that some sociologists try to meet the expectations of journalists and newscasters, or simply do not have enough courage to step out of the line of political correctness, what results from their conformist or opportunist attitudes. So, it seems justified to definitely separate the functions of people who “are engaged in producing academic knowledge from those who in this knowledge see the opportunity of private financial gain” (Krimsky, 2006, p. 217; Sztumski, 2005, p. 29. See: Fudalej, 1991, pp. 85-94).

Lack of independence while working as a sociologist is unprofessional, because a neutral attitude towards explored, described and analyzed content is a sine qua non that influences the impartiality and objectivity of research. That is why a sociologist should clearly determine the extent of personal commitment in the field of research, so that own views, values, beliefs and opinions would not have an impact on the quality and, especially, on the impartiality of conducted and interpreted research. What is more, a sociologist should observe the rules of openness, criticism and respect towards other views, beliefs and scientific perspectives. Being kind and listening patiently to various opinions is a sign of tolerance and a condition of a constructive polemic. It is unacceptable of a researcher, often with an academic degree or title, to think that only their views are justified, unquestionable even. When speaking publicly, a sociologist should feel responsible for presented opinions. The firmness of statements should be based on the extent of substantiation. It is the sociologist duty to reveal all doubts relating to the discussed content. It is unacceptable to speak of own presumptions and personal opinions suggesting that they are founded on sociological knowledge and research results. Furthermore, sociologists should not take part in any public initiative which for various reasons may be recognized as biased or inconsistent with the rules of scientific reliability. If a scientist claims that their scientific work is used by some entities against the rules of ethics, then the scientist should firmly refuse such co-operation and warn public opinion – especially the academia – of attempts to use scientific research improperly (the Sociologists Professional Ethics Code, 2012, pp. 3, 34-35, 39, 44-45; Committee of Ethics in Science, 1994, pp. 15-17; Kulpińska, 1991, pp. 269-273).

¹ Using authority to create and publicize particular opinions. This effect influences the opinions, views, preferences, beliefs and values of recipients.

A sociologist should be especially cautious when discussing political issues, so as not to support particular people or political groups using scientific authority and claiming these groups are the only right and heaven-sent option for the society. A sociologist cannot become an uncritical apologist of specific groups of power or interest. The Sociologists Professional Ethics Code openly forbids the researcher using his academic position to propagate particular political views: “In statements that fall beyond their competence, sociologists should avoid using their academic degrees and titles, and should separate their scientific opinions from other views, especially from political ones. Sociologists should be cautious in stating their views on current political issues, as the effect of personal social preferences on stated opinion may be too powerful (the Sociologists Professional Ethics Code, 2012, p. 40).

Earl Babbie presents a common among the sociologists opinion, which usually remains in the realm of unachieved ideals. Babbie reminds that personal political views of sociologists should not influence their research. Besides, it is unacceptable for the researchers to conduct research unaccordingly to the rules and to present research results in an inexact or erroneous manner in order to promote own political views. Babbie presumes, realistically, that “the norms of science cannot force individual researchers to give up their personal values”. However, “the intersubjective character of science provides a guard against <scientific> findings being the product of bias only” (Babbie, 2004, p. 534).

Impartial analysis of social facts, resulting from professional honesty, is the marker of a sociologist credibility and reliability. A sociologist should always remember that the goal of their work is to know and communicate the truth, and to act for the common good. That way, a sociologist aims at professionalism. A sociologist, regardless of circumstances, even under pressure, should act honestly and responsibly. That way, a sociologist nurtures the good and the positive image of their field (the Sociologists Professional Ethics Code, 2012, pp. 1-3; Kunicki-Goldfinger, 1991, p. 96; Committee of Ethics in Science, 1994, p. 17).

Summary

A sociologist, whose main professional goal is to examine the society, should be perceived as a person enjoying public confidence. Then, the results of the sociologist research, comments and social diagnoses will be taken seriously, and the sociologist will become a recognized expert in their field. Professional ethics is an important factor that supports the research activity of a sociologist, helping the sociologist make difficult decisions and solve problems, especially moral dilemmas. Observing the rules of professional ethics code will result in higher professional standards, and will enable proper relations between the sociologist and the participants as well as co-workers and sponsors or clients of research. What is more, it will help in avoiding conflict situations and in limiting accusations of partiality and dishonesty. The society will appreciate the sociologist contribution to the development of science if the main goal of the sociologist professional activity is unbiased and reliable pursuit of truth for the common good. An unethical behaviour of a sociologist will negatively affect the assessment of the sociologist work by the society, and will give a pretext for broad generalities, harmful for the whole academic sociologist milieu.

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