

Whoever is the author of the saying 'The only constant thing in life is change', they are quite right. Film, theatre or novels could not do without a storyline: a series of interrelated events and plot twists. Our daily conversations also often focus on single events that are of particular importance for us. Besides, it is impossible to imagine a biography—whether spoken and audiotaped, written, or recorded in any other way—that would not contain a history of changes in life. Some of these changes are processual, stretched over time. Others, however, are related to single events that have significantly influenced the course of the subject's life. These events can be planned and predictable (like school graduation) or, on the contrary, sudden and unexpected (like a traffic accident).

In this project, all events that cause important changes in the life of an individual are called 'significant life events.' Such changes (whether positive or negative, subjective or objective) are usually difficult or, more often than not, impossible to reverse. Some of them may be called 'turning points', but due to the ambiguity of this concept, the scope of its use will be a subject of separate analysis within the project.

The main objective of this project is to **explore significant life events and turning points in the biographies of people who experienced the so-called 'real socialism' and post-communist transformation.** For this goal to be achieved, a thorough analysis of two types of data is required, concerning the biographies of selected representatives of the oldest Poles: (1) unstructured biographical interviews conducted with them in 2014–2016 (www.adj.ifispan.pl), (2) questionnaire data on the same people, accumulated in six successive editions of the Polish Panel Survey POLPAN (www.polpan.org), a national longitudinal study of social structure conducted with a questionnaire-based method and carried out since 1987/8. Both types of data have been collected for 44 people. This project aims at analysing the data.

The specific objectives of this project may be summed up as follows:

- 1) creating a catalogue of significant life events referred to by the oldest participants in the Polish Panel Survey POLPAN during the unstructured biographical interviews conducted with them,
- 2) finding an answer to the question on how those events affected the participants' course of life, i.e.:
 - a) how, in their subjective opinion, they affected the whole of their biographies,
 - b) how they influenced the position in social structure that the respondents held throughout the course of their lives;
- 3) analysing the existing definitions of the term 'turning point' and confronting them with the research material gathered; perhaps also formulating my own definition;
- 4) devising a method for comparing and contrasting the material gathered from the unstructured biographical interviews with data collected from the panel quantitative questionnaire-based survey, in which the respondents participated repeatedly (six times);
- 5) analysing the conclusions drawn from comparing the data obtained with so different methods, and drawing up guidelines for researchers who will be using the above tools for investigating the situation of older people.

The reasons for undertaking this research problem are as follows:

- 1) In sociology, there are significant discrepancies regarding (a) the idea to include the issue of significant life events into research, (b) the understanding of the term 'turning point'. The concept of 'turning point' especially escapes quantitative studies of social structure. In Polish sociology, works using this notion are scarce.
- 2) The theoretical assumption about the mutual influence of social structures and individual agency does not translate well into empirical research practice. Social structure studies, usually conducted using quantitative methods, frequently result in generalisations, with unexplained mechanisms behind them. On the other hand, attempts at studying structural phenomena by using qualitative methods are often 'guilty' of unjustified generalisations, not grounded in empirical results.
- 3) Despite the extraordinary advances in *mixed methods* approach, examples of combining quantitative research (especially on large scale, on random samples) with a qualitative biographical approach are extremely rare in sociology. Particularly scarce are attempts to combine such research at the data level rather than the conclusions level. So far, no method to systematically compile such diverse material has been developed.
- 4) At IFiS PAN, unique material has been collected, including data from two longitudinal studies of a very different nature: panel questionnaire-based survey (six waves) and retrospective unstructured biographical interviews. Both types of data have been collected for 44 people. So far, they have been only partially analysed. The results are promising and encourage further, in-depth analysis.