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## ACTIVITY AGAINST ALL ODDS – THE BIOGRAPHICAL COSTS OF ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

**ABSTRACT:** The paper discusses biographical costs incurred by socially engaged Poles and Polish activists. The analysis of biographical narratives of people from various generations of Polish activists and socially engaged Poles who have been actively involved in various sectors, organisations, and spheres of social life indicates that such commitments produce costs which are strongly dependent on historical contexts and on the kind of activity pursued by the individuals; in addition, there are multiple costs which are shared irrespective of specific historical and situational contexts. The findings also show that socially engaged people are not always aware of some costs they bear, or that they only develop such an awareness after a significant time-lapse, a fact of key relevance to this study and to research into costs of activity in general. The costs themselves are viewed as a dynamic ensemble of interdependent factors, the study of which must examine both individual variables (biographies) and broader social issues.

**KEYWORDS:** activism, biographical costs, social engagement.

### Introduction

The objective of the paper is to analyse the biographical costs of social engagement and social activism that have appeared in the narratives of Polish activists, representing 3 different generations (Second World War activists, Polish People's Republic activists and contemporary activists) and different areas of social engagement (struggle for the country's freedom, struggle for human rights, struggle against medical corporations, activism in the field of culture, etc.).

By costs, I mean the negative effects of social engagement and activism that affect the course and/or the individual's quality of life, including, for example, desirable but unfulfilled states of life. Here I also refer to the concept of "biographicity," as suggested by Peter Alheit and his colleagues, i.e. the specific construction and reconstruction of life (Alheit et al., 1995; Alheit & Dausien, 2002). The costs incurred I define as biographical specifically because they require the activists to make various kinds of life reconstructions. Therefore, I pose the question of what biographical costs Polish activists and socially engaged individuals have experienced and are experiencing now.

This paper elaborates on both social engagement and social activism. Although I am aware of the differences between these two, I leave both terms in, in line with the self-identification made by the research participants, upon which the article is

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based – some of whom clearly had negative connotations with the word “social activism,” unequivocally defining themselves as: “socially engaged person”. One possible interpretation of such a significant self-identification of research participants is associated with the analysis of the meaning of the word “activism” and its social role, which in some countries and cultures can have a pejorative meaning (Diekman & Goodfriend, 2007). To some extent, this is also the case in Poland. Yet another reason for using these two terms is the assumption, adopted in the research, that the social engagement and activism are lifelong processes, and that the activists’ biographies reflect the particular “pulsation” of activism – not in every moment of their life were the research participants enough socially engaged to become activists. However, they nearly always showed the tendency to be a part of various organisations and social movements. Over the course of their lives, activism seemed to be just “pulsating moments.” It seems accurate, therefore, to point out the correlation between the terms, especially as the previous studies highlight this tendency, as stressed by, among others, Gregory L. Wiltfang who indicated that activists tend to engage in different activities (Wiltfang, 1991). Similar outcomes were also obtained by Joseph R. DeMartini, who pointed out that activists’ biographies usually reveal their involvement in several non-governmental organisations and social movements, sometimes even simultaneously (DeMartini, 1983). Thus, social involvement would mean participation in social groups (Prohaska, Anderson & Binstock, 2012), formal and informal ones, and/or being the instigator of social activities, including online activities.

### **The costs of social activism and engagement according to the research**

The consequences of social engagement and activism have sometimes been the subject of research and analysis (Bosi, 2007; Bosi, Giugni & Uba, 2016; Chinman & Wandersman, 1999; DeMartini, 1983; Vestergren, Drury & Chiriac, 2017). Instead, many authors emphasise the positive effects of activism on individuals, including, in particular, the impact on their health, such as stress reduction, increased empowerment, improved mental well-being (Klar & Kasser, 2009), personal development and deepened knowledge (Bosi, 2007; Klar & Kasser, 2009; Ballard, Ozer, 2016). It is significant that the positive effects of activism are emphasised for both younger and older activists (Giugni & Grasso, 2016), and this is despite the fact that one recognises major differences in the activism of different generations (e.g., Milkman, 2017).

The positive effects of social engagement and activism are also observed for groups and local communities (Christens, 2012), by emphasising the potential for social change embedded in them (Coy, 2007), their essential role in the growth of the non-profit sector, and even the development of the economy (Sokolowski, 2000). It is therefore

clear that both social engagement and activism can be analysed from the perspective of an individual (e.g., biographical) as well as in terms of social consequences, whereby these two perspectives can complement each other and are distinguishable only on the analytical level.

By doing a systematic review of the literature and the research studies, concerning the effects of activism, Sarah Vestergren et al. indicated that despite the existence of researches, relating to the effects of activism, the negative costs/consequences have been given far less attention in the literature. Moreover, the researchers pointed out that most of the published papers are dedicated to the US and Western societies (Vestergren, Drury & Chiriac, 2017: 2). Additionally, most of the papers devoted to the costs of activism and social engagement are based on studies of particular social movements and a specific type of activism (Giugni & Grasso, 2016), while studies covering different types and kinds of activism are often limited (Anderson & Herr, 2007). This is the approach I advocate in this paper.

The paper will highlight that the costs of social engagement and activism, incurred by the surveyed Polish activists, may have both commonalities (independent of the historical period of engagement and its sphere of activities) as well as context-dependent characteristics. This distinction is crucial for understanding the nature of the costs of social engagement and for providing the answer to the question of how (in what way) these costs depend on historical processes and types of social engagement and activism. Simply focusing on the costs of social engagement and activism can, in turn, contribute to the growing knowledge about the dynamics of individuals' engagement in socially motivated activities, including actions on behalf of other people and those aimed at social change.

### **The approach and research method used**

The research on which the paper is based was conducted within the framework of the departmental grant "Socio-biographical costs of activism in the narratives of female and male social activists in 2016-2020 in Poland", supported by the University of Lower Silesia in Wrocław with funds from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. One of the main goals of the project was to answer the question "What are the biographical costs of engagement and social activism of the Polish activists and social activists?". The supplementary/specific questions were primarily concerned with the similarities and differences between the social engagement costs experienced by individuals belonging to different generations and those involved in different types of social activism (Anderson & Herr, 2007). Hence, a purposive sampling of study participants was used, the criteria for which were: 1) engagement in social activities and activism in different areas of social

life (e.g. struggle for national independence, struggle against communism, human and labour rights, culture, health and lifestyle) 2) age (it was essential that the participants belonged to different generations and, if possible, that the research participants were still socially active) 3) gender (it was ensured that both women and men participated in the research) 4) involvement in various activities and organisations that was evident in the biography (it was important that the research participants experienced membership/participation in various formal and informal organisations). Some individuals were invited to participate in the study via the Internet or by telephone. Among those participating in the research there were: a member of an underground organisation during the Second World War, members of Amnesty International in Poland, Solidarity movement activists (and other movements fighting communism), a creator and activist for the development of a local alternative music culture, a leader of a movement promoting health awareness and struggle against medical corporations, people fighting for workers' and immigrants' rights, the women's rights activists, people involved in local social politics and finally social animators. These were people between the ages of 25 and 89, still socially active and pursuing various forms of activities (including the Internet and social media). Between 2016 and 2020, a total of 15 in-depth interviews were carried out. The decision was made to use biographic interviews (Wengraf, 2001). Research participants were asked to describe their life history in the context of their activism and social engagement. By encouraging those participants to build a narrative, the attention was paid to the issues of their motivation to take action, the course of their actions, the emotions and experiences related to them. If the necessary information was not received, follow-up questions were asked. A total of about 83 hours of research materials were collected. Interviews lasted between 2 and 9.5 hours. The collected material was anonymised in order to assure the privacy of the respondents' identities. Since some of them are recognizable to the wider public, considerable importance was attached to the anonymization processes, by changing not only the participants' names in the research, but also the names of the institutions in which they worked/were members. If there was some information that would make it possible to identify a participant, despite the efforts made (e.g., because their biography is known to the public), it would not be used in publications at all.

The data was encoded using the MaxQda program, by means of the simultaneous coding method, the use of which was justified by the fact that there were other research questions posed in the project (Saldaña, 2013) which were not directly related to biographical costs – the questions asked were, among others, about learning (see Bilon, 2020) and values and sources of social engagement. In total, there were 3 stages of coding, each of which was devoted to the research questions posed in the project. The material was analysed using interpretive method, which, as J. Amos Hatch points out, “in fact,

often involves the researcher, who, once having performed a typological or inductive analysis at a basic level, proceeds to the next level in order to add an interpretive dimension to the previous work” (Hatch, 2002: 180). Therefore, the analysis is a process of constructing knowledge, giving meaning and significance to phenomena, events, objects etc. The typological analysis proposed by Hatch (2002) makes interpretation not so much a unique process, since it is present in all qualitative research, but simply emphasises its importance in the research process. In the research conducted, the idea was to analyse the stories told by research participants and give these stories meaning.

After all, it was not uncommon for study participants to talk about the costs of social activities with some degree of resentment and/or had a tendency not to focus on them.

## Results

The analysis of the acquired research data allowed me to distinguish between two main types of social engagement and activism costs as being experienced by socially engaged people and Polish activists. Below there is a description of both types of costs.

### ***Costs dependent on the contexts and types of activities carried out***

This type of cost is strongly dependent on the time, place and character of the social engagement, bearing in mind that even in the times of the strongest regimes there were activities, encouraged by the authorities and these are in fact desirable. In Poland, both during the Second World War and in the communist period, certain types of social engagement could meet with the approval of the authorities (Ruzikowski, 2017). Any activity that was not in accordance with what was desirable, incurred a significant amount of biographical costs. The time and social change factor minimised the burden and strength of these costs in Poland – the political transformation abolished the threats of the most severe costs, such as tortures and death in one’s own country, thus making the incurred costs of social engagement and activism more dependent on the type of activities carried out.

Those who participated in the research mentioned the following costs of their engagement and activism:

- (a) related to health and physical well-being: during the Second World War and the Communist period, people experienced, among other things, hunger, tortures, beating, lack of hygiene supplies, homelessness, threats of capital punishment or death (their relatives or other co-activists). The research participants talked about these costs with the following words:

*The conditions were terrible, and it was clear that you are being sent to do slave labour, out of which you might not come back. So that was something we were really extremely afraid of. (B-1)*

*She ended up dealing with much worse “ubeks” and getting little response from her local community. So that’s what happened to her. She received the death penalty. (B-1)*

*The first symptoms of tuberculosis appeared, luckily, they were healed later on, although they were not without consequences. (B-1)*

*There were some cases, I mean the practice during those years was I suppose that if they sensed some weakness, they would start to beat you up, otherwise they didn’t... (B-3)*

*One could have suddenly gone to the ground. (B-3)*

Following the political transformation, the possibility of participating in the international social movements strengthened the importance of the type of activity in terms of the costs incurred – nowadays, although in Poland itself people do not receive death penalty for actions against state authorities (or occupiers), there is an immediate threat to the lives of socially engaged people if they are involved, for example, in helping victims of wars and conflicts in different parts of the world. One of the younger research participants recalls:

*I have already met many people like them, somewhere along the way, who, after all, paid a very high price, not even to mention..., physical price, well some of them even died, for example in Timor where I worked for a few months, three people from our mission were beaten to death with machetes. (B-4)*

As can be observed, the costs related to health and physical well-being can be incurred either because of the time and place of the activity, or due to the type of the activity. However, they require specific conditions to arise – none of these types of costs were mentioned by those involved in building local alternative music culture and local animators.

b) related to social life: during the Second World War and the Communist period, these were the costs, such as: arrests, imprisonment, tracking people, telephone harassment, wiretaps, inability to travel and move around the country; following the political transformation: unemployment, being ridiculed on TV and in the press, being the victim of cyber-slander, being the victim of harsh criticism and threats, for instance, on Twitter. The following statements given by one of the research participants, involved in anti-communist activities during the communist period, refer to the aforementioned costs:

*None of these people at that time, including those coming from the Solidarity Movement, talk about it, because everyone wants to be Schwarzenegger, but that’s how it really is... yes, 6am the ringtone.... I do not like those ringtones even nowadays... then it’s like this.... calls...my mother is threatened to be fired from her work: that’s how we lived...then...another picture: I open the door, I go out...two guys are standing at the door and for the whole day they would both walk half a meter away from me, one here, the other one there, like this for a few days...or else: During a certain period, for example, everyone who came to my house, in and out, was legitimised and written down, everyone, for 2 months, including the milkman, the mailman, the tutor lady. Not everyone wanted it that way, yes, these people started to toughen up. (B-3)*

*This is the kind of, let's say, high pressure lifestyle, you write on pieces of paper, flush them down the toilet, all your friends change, they don't want you to be employed anywhere.* (B-3)

Analysing these statements, it can be noticed that active engagement against the communist authorities posed a number of risks and inconveniences not only to the people participating in the research themselves, but also to their families and closest community. Following the political transformation, certain types of social engagement entail an increased risk of social disapproval. For those who participated in the study, these were controversial activities inconsistent with commonly held views or beliefs (e.g., activities on behalf of immigrants or against medical corporations). These individuals stated the following about the costs of these activities:

*And here, because somewhere there somehow, I became a public person, well, lots of nonsense, lies and so on have been floating around the Internet.* (B-2)

*So as if I paid a high price, I might not hear it every day, but people from Warsaw informed me that we are being ridiculed, vilified and so on, but, well, geez, it's tough, but I won't give up my values now.* (B-4)

Therefore, as one may observe, the political transformation in Poland has changed the scope and severity of the costs imposed on socially engaged individuals and activists, whereby those who participated in the research, conducting their activities after the period of transformation, did not experience (unlike those who were engaged in activism earlier) the costs incurred directly by the state authorities. This is the case regardless of whether some of their activities were linked to the protests against the current political situation in the country.

On the other hand, younger people, who are mainly leading their social activities nowadays, paid attention to the “activity trap” cost, which is quite peculiar to the present times (e.g., Bauman, 2000) – this emerging feeling that one should engage in as many social activities as possible in order to stay ahead of the competition on the job market. This is made evident by the comments below:

*It's good to get involved in different things because then the employer may see it on the resume.* (B-9)

*Plenty of young people are self-marketing themselves through our organisation. They collect confirmations of their activities and in general they show they are active everywhere.* (B-4)

These statements indicate that for some of those who are socially active, engagement is a kind of a lifestyle. The reasons for such a perception of social engagement can be traced back to the social change that took place as the neoliberal era emerged, alongside with it, the marketisation of many spheres of social life (Saad-Filho, Johnston & Listwan, 2009).

The biographical costs, whether personal, health-related, or social, relating to social functioning are, needless to say, dependent on the contexts and types of activities

carried out. A clear distinction between them should be made in order to clarify this complex issue.

### ***Shared costs, independent of contexts and types of activities***

This type of cost appeared in the statements of socially engaged people and activists, regardless of the time context, place and type of activity carried out. Accordingly, these were the costs that were common to all the research participants, although, it should be emphasised, these individuals gave different meanings to these costs. Among these costs, the following types could be distinguished:

Table 1. Types of biographical costs, independent of time and type of activity, source: own study

Sphere of life	Type of costs	Statement example
Psychological costs	Burnout and helplessness	<i>Increasingly i began to feel that my actions do not make any more sense. (B-7)</i> <i>Somehow i had absolutely no strength left neither for this action nor even for looking at all this. (B-10)</i>
	Excessive sense of responsibility and feeling of being a “slave of the cause”	<i>I feel kind of like a slave that I have to do it. And I’m doing it, it may even be in spite of myself, because I’ve thought about it so many times, well in one of my videos I said that I could actually have said, why should I care. (B-5)</i> <i>If any other people showed up here, I think I might have been able to slow down, however I feel it is my responsibility. (B-8)</i>
Daily functioning and professional life	Subordination of the daily life and professional life to social activism	<i>I have an interest in women’s issues, so I have been devoting my whole life to them. (B-9)</i> <i>Sometimes I get off from work because there is a necessity to help someone, but that doesn’t always please the boss, I have to admit. (B-8)</i>
	Costs related to family and relatives	<i>My wife... she is patient, as she indeed has to put up with a lot. Sometimes she can’t stand it. (B-8)</i> <i>Actually, I had one marriage ruined because I’m such a socialite and constantly doing something somewhere. (B-10)</i> <i>I will never stop feeling remorseful that I don’t even have time in the evening to read books to my own children. (B-8)</i>
	The necessity to accept the consequences of one’s own actions	<i>Eventually people get used to living under the wire. (B-2)</i> <i>Well, what am I going to do... nothing...? I have to put up with it, although it’s not easy when they talk such nonsense about me. (B-3)</i>
	Not enough time for other activities and fulfillment of other life needs	<i>My dream was to be able to travel, but I never had time to do it, not even an opportunity, after all, no one would give me a passport. (B-3)</i> <i>I don’t even have time to read a book in peace, because I’m constantly running somewhere, running some errands for someone. (B-8)</i>



Moreover, all research participants have mentioned the fact that they were unprepared for the consequences of their activities, regardless of the nature of those consequences. Whereas those who were engaged in their activities during the wartime and Communist period emphasised their lack of preparation for the conventions, such as interrogations [“no one taught us how to respond to their questions” (B-1)], younger people showed their unpreparedness for the consequences of other sorts, such as those related to interpersonal communication:

*How could I know that my actions would lead to their quarrel? I don't know how to solve such situations... it's not easy and from now on there is always the fear that instead of getting people to integrate, I will do the opposite. (B-7)*

*Here's sort of a communication dissonance between us and the neighbourhood, obviously we are trying to step into those shoes, but I'm not saying it's super comfortable for us. (B-5)*

In each case, the consequences of the actions evoked fear and discomfort.

Interestingly, only long afterwards a few people have realised that their close relatives were the ones who paid the price for their social engagement, as the following statements indicate:

*My wife... It was only after her death that I understood how she had suffered. As I couldn't understand it before... (B-1)*

*After many years, the kids admitted that they felt that Dad was for everyone except them. (B-3)*

It is noteworthy that the analysis of the above statements allows us to introduce an additional criterion for dividing the costs that emerged in the testimonials of those who participated in the research: these are namely realised and unrealised (or realised after a long time) costs. Drawing our attention to the existence of these costs seems relevant insofar as it makes it possible to be more critical in assessing social activity – based on narrative research, some of the costs incurred by those who are active may not be accessible if that person is not aware of them.

In the narratives of those who participated in the research, another type of cost emerged, that of social engagement and activism. Since it was not dependent on contexts and types of activism, nor did it occur in all statements (6 out of 15), I have distinguished it separately. This cost concerns the stress related to the necessity of working with others. Those who participated in the study pointed out the quarrels, struggles for power, micro-politics of the organisation's members that can take place in organisations, the proof of which can be found in the below comments:

*The so-called battle between Gdansk and Warsaw was tremendous. (B-4)*

*For example, there have been..., perhaps I will start here first with the dark sides of wielding the power, .....enormous conflicts, conflicts over power... how awful it was. (B-8)*

Such situations meant that social activities and activity in organisations turned out to be less satisfying than the research participants assumed.

## Conclusions

The conducted research is congruent and consistent with some of the research findings carried out within the field of the effects and costs of social engagement and social activism. The experiences of the oldest interviewed activists who experienced the costs of activism in different historical periods and various types of activism proved to be extremely valuable. It was emphasised, for instance, that regardless of historical and political contexts, there will always be social issues that require engagement, even if there are costs involved.

Emphasizing (appropriately by all research participants, not only those with the most experience) the readiness to bear these costs as well as focusing only a little on them raises questions about the strength of motivation for social actions and, more importantly, ways of dealing with the costs incurred. While previously, for example, Rachel L. Einwohner (2002) examined methods of keeping a sense of self-efficacy and dealing with burnout, I would like to draw attention to the importance of costs to biography, defined as the construction and reconstruction of life (Alheit et al., 1995). Studies have shown that the costs incurred affect not only the daily lives of those involved, but sometimes change the trajectory and course of the entire life, including that of their loved ones. The costs incurred sometimes made the participants in the research step back (usually temporarily and only partially) from the activities they had undertaken, as they reconstructed their life paths anew. Besides, the process, which Anthony Giddens refers to as “reflexive monitoring of practices” (Giddens, 1984), while the field of adult learning analysis defines it as “biographical learning” (Alheit & Dausien, 2002), meant that socially engaged individuals experienced periods of great doubt regarding the significance of the activities undertaken. It was during these periods, most often, that people became aware of all costs incurred. Therefore, in this research, the category of unrealised, realised and/or after-time realised costs proved to be crucial. This is because the biographies of the people participating in the study showed that sometimes a person who is strongly focused on social activities does not perceive the costs incurred.

The studies also showed the complexity of the relationship between engagement (action), costs and the biography of the people participating in the research. As a consequence, this allowed me to recognise the dynamics of their social activity, in which, as I have already mentioned, the moments of their engagement in formal organisations (e.g., NGOs), informal organisations (social movements), including those of an

activist nature, are present. Analysis of the statements of these people helps to notice that the costs of activities have appeared almost constantly. These have had, over the lifetime of the people participating in the study, different levels of intensity and have been given varied meanings.

Based on the research conducted, it is possible to identify the most important factors that influenced the type, intensity and importance given to the costs of the activity carried out:

- 1) historical-political factors: political-economic system, the governing party, local authorities,
- 2) geographical factors: the place of activity,
- 3) interpersonal and communication factors: type and quality of the social and family bonds, organisation/ movement culture, types of support received,
- 4) personal factors: motivation to act, psychological resilience, ability to cope with difficult situations,
- 5) the specificity of the activity.

The costs of social engagement and activism can thus be seen as a dynamic system of interdependent factors, the study of which requires the focus on both stand-alone/ individual issues (biographies) and social issues. This is how the costs have been presented in the research participants' narratives. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that the methodology adopted in the research does not allow generalisations to be made. The study sought the diversity of participants and analysis of their individual biographies; therefore the research is not based on a representative research sample. Although similarities can be traced in the Polish literature, including the biographies of activists, in terms of the costs incurred (e.g., Bikont & Łuczywo, 2018), it has not been analysed systematically. Also, the group of respondents selected does not allow for comparisons of costs incurred by the members of the same organisation (Chinman et al., 1998). The respondent criteria adopted in the project meant that among those 15 respondents there were people who were members of the same Non-Governmental Organisation, albeit in different time period.

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