

SOCIAL MICROCULTURES*

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It is standard practice that social scientists borrow concepts from entirely different fields: for example construction, projection, or culture. It follows from the need to apply new theoretical frameworks as well as from the necessity to provide a more adequate description, an analysis of the changing social world. It is similar with the concept of microculture (and the attribute social would not probably change much) which has a flavour of "something biological". In the following study we shall discuss its justification in the description and analysis of human social life, with focus on the social life of young people.

The micro-social

As early as in 1890, William James used the concept of sub-world. Its definition is based on the consideration that no individual is or can be related to the social reality as a whole, that only a part of it is of real importance to him/her, and, for this reason, it is real for him or her. According to James, only what is related to our active life, our emotionality, to what evokes our interest is real. James' optics through the individual was moved further by G. Simmel and J.L. Moreno in the concept of "social atom" as a system of sociometric relations or K. Lewin in the theory of the social field. The concept of microworld (sub-world) has been used until today. In cognitive sciences it means an interaction of an individual with a computer (see e.g. Difonzo, 1998). Moreno's basic principles have become one of the bases of the contemporary analysis of social networks (Buščíková, 1999). This branch of research might be named cognitive-social.

The representation of the socio-cultural or, the other way round, cultural-social branch in research is relatively weaker. The use of the concept of microculture itself is currently rather limited. For example, the point at issue is the research of microcultures to which a researcher belongs and this can influence his/her decision-making in the process of research (Herry, 1996). Another practice-oriented research shows that it is easier for foreigners to learn the language of their new country if

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the microculture of the class is in accord with the macroculture of the life beyond the class (Tobin, McRobbie, 1996). For instance, the relation between masculine microcultures and nationalistic ideology is also analysed (Nagel, 1998). A.K. Sirsi, J.C. Ward and P.H. Reingen (1996) offer an idea of what can be regarded as a social microculture. The authors had long and intensively studied one microculture of macrobiotics and a microculture of the proponents of animal rights. They found out that there was a wide scale of culturally shared contents, which was not observable within greater sociocultural aggregates. The presence and the function of "expert", cultural core conceptions, social relations and the structure of social networks were important signs. This paper shows that there are two dimensions interconnected in the spontaneously formed "small" social grouping, in microculture. It is the social dimension, including for example the composition, position, roles, and interpersonal relations of the members of the grouping, and the cultural dimension; in this case, for example the shared philosophy of eating or animal protection.

^ A question arises whether this concept can be equally used in traditional small groupings, such as a family or a school class. There can be some doubt whether their cultural content is "sufficiently" filled. The problem seems to consist only partly in the fact whether general features of culture can be found, for example, within a family, like the products of human work, regulates and norms, knowledge, values, symbols, etc. The question is, whether they are typical, characteristic, or peculiar to this particular family microculture or whether they create a compact system, or, how much a sort of steady style and aesthetic harmony is present (Murphy, 1999).

Contemporary sociocultural space for microcultures

Let us now turn away from the definition of the concept of microculture and have a look at whether it has any sense to deal with this phenomenon in regard to broader sociocultural trends. It is the question of how much "nutritive substrate" there is for social microcultures in the contemporary world. It is also the question of the possibility and attractiveness of the social and cultural microspace in comparison with the wider social space, or, on the other hand, of the possibility and attractiveness compared to the individual life.

Z. Bauman (1995) characterizes the contemporary postmodern times as the collapse of the super-project of a perfect society. The project of the German Reich as well as the project of "the gardens of Eden of communism" failed and the trust in similar projects was also lost. Current projects are subject to privatization, de-regulation and fragmentation. The ongoing "decay and feebleness of state power" (Bauman, 1995, p. 14) can provide space for "other" smaller social or local social groupings. The emptied space for power becomes filled with strong commercial companies seducing into consumption through the mass media. The social structuralization is of no principal importance to these companies in pursuit of their chief aim: maximization of profits. Addressing individuals can be useful since it can lead to socially uncorrected decision-making in the field of consumption just as

social interaction can be sold if its content is consumption. The influence of mass consumer or global society on the creation of the cultural dimension of the contemporary world is not clear either. Companies dealing with consumption buy and steal the new in music, clothing, etc. produced in subcultures on the periphery of a community and offer them in the amended form for wide consumption. These products stripped of the original ideas broaden the reproduced cultural variety. "Stealing and buying up" is a stimulus for seeking new original alternatives. For example, it is reflected in a variety of the cultural trends in the USA of the 1990s and, because of its significance, it is often compared to the culture of the hippies (Daly, Wice, 1999). On the other hand, "the stealing and buying up" can also lead to the loss of the original identity or destruction of the afflicted social groups.

The state as well as other traditional institutions, such as the family, church, school and trade unions are undergoing severe erosion. The obligations and contacts of the people with these institutions cooled, particularly because they failed to conform to the new social situation. The leaving of the institutions leads to a search for other social, or quasi- social alternatives, such as be cliques, other religions, the internet, etc. The radical abandonment of the institutions primarily means the leaving of social frames as such, individuation and pluralization in life and life styles, as pointed out, for example by U. Beck. The clear affiliation with the class, sex, age generation is not under the pressure of the regulative force and therefore it stops binding an individual within its boundaries. Abandoning the fixed points: values, rituals, etc. brings "randomness of being that is placed with all its weight on the individual and he has to struggle with it by his own means" (Bauman, 1995). The total split of the social life into particular units is probably also hindered by an archaic defensive socially cementing strength. It is probably the "urgent need of physical closeness" (Giddens, 1999, p.107), which does not decay although it has to compete with more and more perfect means of long-distance communication. It can be, as reported by D. Boden, H. Molotch, and E. Goffman (Giddens *ibid.*), because people are provided with richer information about what people think and feel, if they are honest.

A traditional social institution – the family is also changing, trying to remain attractive at least partially. K. Torrance (1998) speaks about six interconnected trends of today, which are the basis for the description of the changes taking place in families and related primarily to parent-child relationships and the child's culture. They are: individuation, pluriformization (concerning various lifestyles) performance-oriented society, trend from formality to informality, an increase in the right to privacy and negotiation, which replaces communication authority-inferior. Generally speaking, particularly in Europe, parent-child relationships have opened up and released towards a greater respect for rights and integrity of the individual family members. There was an increase in the feelings of individuals as autonomous beings who can make their own plans and decide about their lives and be more responsible for themselves (Christhol, 1995).

A similar trend toward respecting children in families was also recorded in Slovakia. The results obtained by comparing parent-child relations in the 1960s and 1990s (Lukšík, Mišíková, 1994) show that parents (and adults in general) have become less important for children particularly in the so-called authoritative situations and become more important in partner situations. Parents (mostly mothers) of 14-18-year-olds even refuse their authoritative position to some extent (Lukšík, 1996). But this respect for the young people within families does not automatically mean their autonomy. Other findings show rather the contrary. The results obtained from Austrian-Slovak comparative researches of secondary-school students carried out in 1991 and 1992 by M. Vlček, M. Zvalová, and B. Kadlecová and reported by L. Macháček (1996) indicated that young people still rely on parents and the state's care. Tolerance and solidarity predominate over the orientation towards performance. According to M. Zvalová (1994), young people between the age of 14 and 18 years place a somewhat higher value on tolerance, peaceful and harmonious life than on personal freedom and self-realization. P. Macek (1997) speaks about the Czech youth of the first half of the nineties as about the young people who value positive relations among people and are almost socially dependent.

The centre of social life is shifted from the family to the peer group. In German families, strong family ties and direct control over the everyday life of children by adults at home are replaced by the activities of children outside the family and the orientation towards peer groups increases. Early liberation from the direct control of adults gives children an approach to material and cultural sources independent of the adults' influence (Büchner, 1990). A similar trend was also recorded in Slovakia. A comparison of the people close to children and young people in the sixties and the nineties, showed that while parents prevailed in the sixties, friends and peers predominate today. In contrast to the trend towards individuation and independence of children and young people, their continuing economic dependence is evident. Autonomy is tolerated and in many families also supported, but its realization often depends on the parents' financial situation. Young people are in fact legally powerless, that is without any power to influence social events. They only have power in their specific, relatively autonomous social world (Mišíková, 1999), which may also be the reason why it is valuable for them.

The state institutionalization of children's and adolescents' education and increased leisure time limited the specific way of the life of the young people. A substantial change in the biography of children was the early winning of independence in many areas of life (Büchner, 1990). As transitions to the world of labour became longer, children's biographies were individuated (Roberts, 1995). The period of spending most time with their peers at school and outside of it was also prolonged. Individuation has a considerable bearing on the new construction of identity. The issue of identity becomes, according to A. Giddens (Džambazovič, 1998), a private problem and the standard biography of a youngster of today resembles a biography consisting of an endless series of personal choices, with the slogan "life as a

project" (O. Stafseng, 1995); the biography is not emotional any more, but rather cognitive and cultural, the self is the reflexive project with an individual responsible for it, biographies being much more complicated and individuated; youngsters select from a wide variety of possible strategies, often changing their value preferences, behaviour patterns, selecting aspects suitable for their individual needs from subcultures, the identity being "pieced together" in a way (Džambazovič, 1998).

We indicated in this part some general trends characterizing the present day and the life of young people. We pointed to the findings based primarily on the research of the social group and the individual. The dimension of culture has remained so far out of play.

Generally, the mass media as well as some professional circles view the western youth culture as violent, drug, consume-oriented, based on music, drugs, adventurous travelling, and club life. It is a rather stereotyped image which does not encompass all young people (Skelton, Valentine, 1998). In our conditions, the concept of youth culture is not much thought about. However, we have recently witnessed works dealing with some individual youth subcultures (Džambazovič, Klobucký, 1999). Traditional and class-based youth subcultures (skinheads, punk, anarchists) are losing their influence and it seems to be so also in Slovakia (see *Situačná analýza postavenia mládeže v SR*, 1999). However, new subcultures arise. Variety, diversity, even "floweriness" (Christhol, 1995) of youth cultures is typical primarily of the 1990s (for more details, see Brake, 1993, Daly, Wice, 1999). Generally speaking (it cannot be said for certain for Slovak conditions), the position visibility, given by the contemporary position of young people is extended by the author's visibility occurring in youth subcultures (Mišíková, 2001).

One of the images of the youth cultures scene in western Germany of the late 1980s was presented by W. Ferchhoff (1990) as a five-fold typology:

1. New age mysticism. This includes drug subcultures, religious and quasi-religious sects and groups. They represent neoromanticism longing for cosmic harmony, seeking salvation in a narcissist introspection. They arose as a reaction to hollow, utilitarian, and technocratic world.

2. Progressive youth cultures. Their members come from the new middle class and tend to be better educated than average. They support the values of anticonsumerism of the "simple life" and value is placed on spontaneity, permanent reflexivity, authentic behaviour and the purpose of life.

3. Hedonistic post-modernism. It is an anti-ideological youth culture, whose goal is the distinction from "conventional normality".

4. Boys on street corners. The "macho" youth culture occupies – in physical and symbolic form – public spaces or redefines space as its own territory.

5. The silent majority quietly adopts and reproduces familiar traditions, values and patterns of behaviour.

The trend of the development is toward sociocultural groupings with new content and forms, which also brings the necessity of new outlooks and concepts.

According to M. Maffesoli (1996) the more lasting and more visible cultures of the seventies and eighties, differentiated according to their affiliation to social classes, ethnicity, and sexuality, became the basis of the new forms of collectiveness. Maffesoli's term tribe (clique, crowd, gang) is better for the openness of the borders and for fluctuated membership of the youth "groupings". It is related to a certain life setting, it is a state of mind and being mostly expressed by the lifestyle which prefers the external appearances and form (Bennett, 1999). Fitting into a number of social groupings in everyday life is a way of confirmation of one's social identity and styles. Tribal values replace the ethical orientation of Durkheim's "collective" conscience and traditional morals (Hendry, Kloep, Olsson, 1998). W. Ferchhoff (1990) also says that youth culture, as a concept used in earlier cultural studies, lost its meaning in Germany. The position of the young people is at least semi-autonomous in relation to the production and reproduction of culture and lifestyles. The commercial media, the consumer and free time market have taken control over the trend of the production and reproduction; no youth culture can be regarded as authentic any more. The increase in peer cultural interactions has also been observed in post-communist countries. It seems that the trend of the development is towards the accelerated circulation and coexistence of the variety of momentary styles and subcultures (Wallace, Kovacheva, 1996).

In the preceding part, the use of the concepts of culture, subculture, and microculture was rather loose. Now we shall try to make a step toward the definition of the concept of microculture in relation to the other mentioned concepts.

Microcultures and other cultures

There are several characteristics of culture that can be used to characterize the level of micro-. They include collective consciousness, typical form of life, lifestyle (free time spending, clothing, books, TV, PC, etc.), preferred, created physical and social environment, common knowledge, convictions, faith, taste, emotions, language, and others, which are exchanged, imitated, strengthened, handed down among the members of the particular culture (extended according to Geist, 1992).

The difference between macro- and micro-levels of culture consists in the size of the social group, which participates in its shaping by the number of cultural products or by their visibility. Also microcultures small in number can create significant and visible products, which is the case of artistic schools, or, at present, for example of advertising teams. In this case, the intensity of interactions among the members of the particular microculture plays an important role.

A microculture is not a subculture in traditional understanding, where it is viewed as a group which deviates from the normative ideals of adult communities. The definition of microculture is rather closer to that of the Chicago school, that is as differing from undifferentiated irrational and politically manipulated masses by its activity and creativity (Gelder, Thornton, 1997).

A microculture differs from its environment. The measure of the otherness can be diverse. The difference from the non-problematic normal, dominant, mean social image can be more or less conspicuous, but it can also highlight or even caricature it. It need not necessarily be a protest against the dominant adult world, or an expression of the need to solve a social (class) problem, as it was in the case of a subculture.

A significant distinctive sign of the specific social formation, either subculture or microculture, is the style. It is defined through clothing, outward appearance, music, activities, etc. It is a strong instrument giving value and cohesion to the group. Its function can be similar to a totem, as Durkheim says, that is something providing visible expression of the individual meaning of belonging to a group – belonging to something that compensates for the lack of “individuality”. It enables the group to know itself and to be known (Gelder, Thornton, 1997).

One of the possibilities to distinguish between subcultures and microcultures was proposed by Š. Kövérová (personal communication). According to her, a subculture is the culture of a homogeneous social group, which is minority in a society and a microculture is the culture of the particular cultural setting within a society. In the newer definition of subculture, as a shared perspective, which is not fixed to a defined group but is only an explicit lifestyle, a sort of “scene”, the indicated difference between subculture and microculture fades away. It is equally valid for the definition of Sibutani’s reference worlds which are not connected with any particular group or territory (Irwin, 1997).

The concept of microculture is similar to Maffesoli’s (1996) postmodern neo-tribe, that is to short-term fluid and fragmentary, although regular, social grouping, differing in shared lifestyles, hobbies, and taste. Of course, in addition to such contemporary groupings that are based on mass consumerism, we think that microcultures also include social groups which create and maintain their own cultural authenticity and creativity.

In connection with microcultures, H. Wulff (1988) speaks about such meanings and evident cultural forms that occur among a small number of interconnected individuals and about the membership in four areas: social club, street, school, home.

Let us use the example of school microculture. What is it like? Each microculture has a sort of support, it is conditioned, limited or strengthened by the culture of a broader social setting. The culture of education is an example. In contemporary circumstances it is probably the culture of education based on teachers-experts or teachers-engineers (for details, see Leirman, 1996). One of the main characteristics of the school culture, which currently prevails in Slovakia, according to Š. Kövérová (1996), is that it does not allow the creation of spontaneous groups typical of social life. The space created by this school culture for possible microcultures is limited. It concerns particularly the creation of microcultures of mixed generations. There is some space in semi-formal interest extracurricular activities or those taking place during leisure time. The groupings which are organized on the

basis of confidentiality (for example, ethics teacher and his or her pupils) are probably an exception; these can lead to sharing similar values or to bringing some features of the lifestyles of teachers and pupils closer together. There is larger room for shaping one-generation social groupings, although it is also limited in schools to the time before school, during the breaks and after school.

The questions of the formation and the existence of the particular social microculture in such a limiting school setting can be clarified and answered by social research.

Some issues of research and questions for research into microcultures

M.M. Gordon (1997) reports that separated analyses according to classes, ethnic groups, etc. are left in favour of the holistic integrated approach of "world in world". It is not a general or prevalent trend in social sciences but it shows it is a good future trend, although rather demanding. The demandingness concerns for example the methodological procedure of triangulation: the combination of different methods, researchers, research groups, research places, and various time circumstances and theoretical perspectives (Hendl, 1997). The point is not the independent activity of a researcher any more, often not a dialogue between the researcher and the respondent, but the polyphony with a complex of relative future trends in research.

One of the crucial problems – the subject of ethnology that is also inspiring for other social sciences, is the position of the researcher. R.E. Park (1997) regards observation as the only adequate holistic vehicle for understanding nuances of convictions and social practices of communities. The search for the balance between the one who is inside and the one who is outside is emphasized (Polsky, 1997, Humphrey, 1997). N. Polsky (1997) warns against the position "to be one of them". Another question is coping with the obtained information. The researcher is responsible for writing "a story" about subculture and has control over its representation for the external world. For example, it is up to him/her whether s/he introduces it as pathological or progressive (Polsky, 1997).

Several questions arise for an empirical study of microcultures. It would be interesting to study the differentiation of social microcultures in their social setting and also the differentiation from subcultures and cultures, cultural scene, Maffesoli's tribes, etc. Some differences will become more distinct particularly in inter-cultural comparisons. On the other hand, it will not be possible to overlook how microcultures are supported or limited by cultures of broader social setting or how they are interconnected. Within microcultures themselves, it will be interesting to follow, in addition to the characteristics described – like their size, personal composition, or common social features (clothing, etc.), common activities, history, etc., also social relationships inside and outward, their "cementing" philosophies", etc. From the perspective of an individual, the questions can be derived from his or her affiliation to particular microcultures and the strength of their common ties and their significance for the establishment of his/her social identity or the impact on his/her lifestyle.

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