# Social exclusion paradox in Poland

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## *Abstract*

*The process of social exclusion can be described from two perspectives: of the society that stigmatizes and of the stigmatized group. The paper explores the paradox of social exclusion of football hooligans in Poland. The authors argue that social exclusion is not necessarily connected with the reduced level of the quality of life. The sense of belonging to a hooligan group becomes the essential source of support. Simultaneously it is a foundation for shaping one's identity.*

**Introduction – social exclusion vs. quality of life**

The current usage of the notion of *social exclusion* features mainly in the context of social sciences, and predominantly within social politics, encompassing socio-economic, political, and (less frequently) culture-related conditions of existence of social groups. Much as it is new, the notion describes to a phenomenon that has a long history. According to Szarfenberg (2006) the definitions of social exclusion relate to:

- problems connected with participation in the life of society or community;

- problems of accessing resources, goods within public sphere, institutions or social systems;

- problems connected with social laws, which are respected only to some extent or rejected altogether;

- poverty and deprivation.

The marginalization and social exclusion are connected with low professional status,the mentally disturbed, the physically disabled, the victims of violence, the elderly, adolescents, etc. Hilary Silver (1994) distinguished 23 such groups. Likewise, the National Social Integration Strategy for Poland anticipates substantial risk of social exclusion (NSIS, 2003) among 24 types of persons: those who have

experienced problems with accessing job market or education, or have low professional qualifications. The groups at risk include the handicapped, the addicted, the singles, the crime element, foreigners and refugees, ethnic minorities, religious and cultural minorities, women, children (working children from pathological families), persons with poor housing conditions, those who engage in lifestyle pursuits that are socially inadequate or considered deviant (criminals, substance abusers, quirks, etc.) and persons who display downward mobility.

From the psychological perspective a weak network of social support, poorly-established social bonds, and low social capital play a key role in the processes of social exclusion and poverty and homelessness. Significantly it affects various social groups: marginalization across all of the above-mentioned groups.The society relies on a number of various mechanisms to maintain its *status quo*, thus ensuring the predictability and control of the social world. The process of social exclusion may vary in the degrees of "acuteness", ranging from the out-and-out exclusion from social life to the more subtle mechanisms of social exclusion, as in the instances of placing the blame on certain groups, stigmatizing them or enveloping them with silence.

By adopting a broader point of view – beyond social politics – we are faced with a situation whereby the

social group is perceived as different. The majority of society sets this group apart, and embarks on actions aimed at isolating, discrediting or even discriminating against this group. From the psychological perspective the criterion of "being different" may assume various forms. Paradoxically, being a member of the lower register of society entails the risk of social exclusion no less than belonging to the highest ranks of society (see: Girard, 2002). Notably the risk of social exclusion occurring grows in the time of social unrest.

The notion of the *quality of life* deserves reflection on a number of related issues. The researches are unanimous that it encompasses three dimensions of human functioning – psychological, social and physical. The quality of life evolves dynamically, with a number of factors – external and internal – influencing its level. Besides, two aspects of the quality of life may be distinguished: objective and subjective. From psychological standpoint the perceived quality of life hinges on emotional and cognitive processes – pertaining to self-esteem and the assesment of the environment (Ryan and Deci, 2001; Diener et al., 2003)

## Two hidden assumptions

It is commonly assumed that being a part of the group that is socially excluded entails a decrease in the quality of life – at individual or group level. This is a consequence of such factors as: a diminished income, a sense of being rejected by the society, aversion shown by others, and a resulting sense of alienation. There are at least two hidden assumptions behind such a reasoning: involuntary character of exclusion – does marginalization or exclusion comprise situations wherein the individual 'does not want to' participate in the social life or are narrowed down to situations wherein individual 'is unable' to participate; individuals or groups that are subjects of exclusion aspire to belong to society or to middle- or upper-middle classes.

The authors intend to show that being a member of the socially excluded group does not necessarily entail a decrease the quality of one's life but - quite paradoxically - it may even help to improve it. By analyzing the example of *football hooligans* we intend to show that the group may provide a considerable source of support for the individual, a foundation for moulding one's identity, whereas the sharing of ideas and professing the same values help alleviate the feeling of loneliness. The group offers its members a set of unambiguous rules of conduct and comprehensible ways of achieving recognition

and prestige in community. Last but not least - and paradoxically - the phenomenon of football hooligans may be seen as an attempt of realizing their ideals based on violence and of attracting young people to their cause.

## Psychological benefits related to the situation of exclusion on the example of soccer hooligans

### Alleviated sense of alienation.

Deviant behaviours, manifested in groups of sport supporters can be explained as a way of coping with the sense of alienation (Piotrowski, 2000, 2006). The rules of social exchange and the values permeating society at large are rejected by the football hooligans who consider the social rules (legal, moral, customary and cultural) as unclear, internally contradictory, and imposed from the outside. Moreover, they are convinced that by complying with these rules they will not be able to reach their own goals. The group values and standards are perceived as alternative to the principles inculcated by school and the mass-media, which are regarded as unclear and ineffective in satisfying the needs. The sense of being rooted into the local community and identification with a group of soccer fans is accompanied by a sense of increasing alienation and inability to function in a wider social context.

### Clear-cut ways of career.

A group establishes a set of simple rules of conduct - alternative to the rules promulgated by the school, the family or the media. The ways for achieving respect and prestige are also clearly defined: aggressive behaviours, commitment and devotion, readiness to support the team during away-from-home matches. Provoking brawls with the opponent team's fans, clashes with the police, acts of vandalism, all serve to reassert or enhance individual status (and group status in the so-called *hooligan league*).

### Clearly-defined idealistic values.

Soccer hooligans adhere to the idealistic values that they understand in a specific way – as disregarded by the rest of society. These values include: honour, allegiance to the ideals and emblems of the club, loyalty and commitment to 'the cause'. Courage features prominently among them. One should never back out from a fight even when the opponent group far outnumbers one's own. Fleeing from the "battlefield" is perceived as an utmost betrayal of friends. Courage is a prerequisite for loyalty within the group. Moreover, in the subculture of soccer hooligans an unwritten rule prohibits launching attacks on women, children, or otherwise uninvolved

persons. Due to their attachment to these values the soccer hooligans consider themselves to be the elite of sport supporters and the last remaining advocates of the ideals of *fair play*.

### A chance to express one's opinions.

Significantly, while supporting their favourite football team, participating in various matches away from home, the members of the group are presented with an opportunity to express their opinions freely. Often it is a novel opportunity that was beyond their reach earlier, due to young age or inadequate social position. Football stadium stands are a prime platform for expressing and publicizing these opinions. The same applies to *fanzins* – newsletters issued by soccer hooligans. The group provides the individual with support and justification, which does not only facilitate promulgation of socially unacceptable (e.g. racist) ideas, but serves to justify various acts of deviant behaviour.

### Reinforced group coherence resulting from social exclusion.

Paradoxically, any attempt on the part of society to stigmatize the members of the group, to exert pressure on them to change their behaviour, or any promulgation of negative opinions on the group does not affect the said behaviour nor change the group affiliation. Quite conversely, it only enhances the coherence of such a group. As a result of mechanisms described by social psychology the group or, as in this case, the subculture unites its forces in opposition to a common enemy. Solidarity among soccer hooligans - irrespective of the club they support - is best illustrated by clashes with police. Even the rival fan groups unite their forces on such occasions. Tainted by pseudo-ideology of soccer hooligans subculture, the image of the policeman is the embodiment of various negative traits: stupidity, cowardness, and also incompetence combined with unjustified brutality.

### Replaced meanings.

Soccer hooligans are not inclined to passively accept the label imposed on them by the social audience. They attempt to negotiate it. Critical opinions on the soccer supporters only reinforce the coherence of their group and in a way may be 'cherished' by them. Negative labeling (e.g. bandits) may be entertained conversely by the team members and implemented in the process of self - labeling as a positive value, which enables the group to stand out from the rest of 'regular' society, the representatives of which they despise. What we are observing is a discourse in an

attempt at defining the role of the sport supporter in contemporary world. Much as the public opinion defines the sports fan mainly as the "consumer" in the sport event, the soccer hooligans emphasize the significance of values such as: loyalty, honour, readiness to incur renunciation for the 'club colors' and non- compromised ways of defending them.

### Taking control over exclusion.

A group of soccer hooligans consists of individuals alienated from the mainstream of social activities. The experience of relative deprivation is conducive to feelings of resentment and humiliation, which may in turn generate aggression. What emerges is a permanent inclination to perceive the world as hostile, which, by projecting thus generated aggression beyond the group further reinforces the coherence of the group, thus protecting the group from the negative consequences of such aggression. On the other hand, developmentally inherent tendencies of activating defences will transform the feeling of humiliation into a sense of superiority and pride blown out of all proportion. When compounded, these tendencies will affect the experience of relative deprivation. Having been excluded themselves, the soccer hooligans try to subject others to exclusion: 'bad knights' of the opponent football clubs or their own persecutors (the society at large). In conclusion - the paradox rests in the fact that the soccer hooligans capitalize on the stigmatization and exclusion of which they are the subject. By transforming the stigmatization into 'hallmark of glory' and the exclusion into 'a holy anointment' they consequently create foundations for their prestige and identity.

### Conclusions

We have attempted to show that within the framework of *paradox of exclusion* pertaining to certain groups (subcultures) such as football supporters, the marginalization does not necessarily involve a decrease of the quality of life (as perceived subjectively by the individual or the group). Significantly, the individual is shielded from the perceived sense of the low quality of life that accompanies social exclusion. This occurs as a result of the creation of the group bonds, following a set of comprehensive rules of conduct, adherence to the same values. When a group that had been marked by (or is at risk of ) social exclusion is capable of creating strong internal bonds that lead to the emergence of a subculture, then the social exclusion may only further reinforce the group coherence.

Both the functioning of subcultures based on

aggression and resistance towards the society as well as counteracting them actively (which further strengthens their integration and resistance) are very disadvantageous for society, which subsequently loses control over these subcultures as well as capacity to re-integrate them. Such groups pose a threat to society as they may become purveyors of alternative and often destructive values, attracting individuals who perceive themselves as marginalized by the contemporary society.

Therefore it seems reasonable that apart from implementing repressive measures (stadium entry ban, efficient prosecution immediately after the breach of law, etc.) we should step up efforts to initiate and support preventive measures at a local level.

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