

Barbara Jezierska Ph.D.

Wrocław University

Austrian and Polish Students Assessing Phenomena of Social Pathology

Social pathology are the behaviours, institutions, social systems and structures remaining in a fundamental, impossible to reconcile, conflict with the prevailing values that are accepted within a given society. It has a relative dimension, meaning that in a distinctive time and cultural and social area observed are its manifestations that are characteristic for a given place and age as well as the fact that in the beliefs, images and feelings of the members of a given society they constitute a significant affliction (A. Podgórecki 1969, p. 24, B. Urban 2000, p. 69 - 72).

Thus, the scope of the social pathology is determined by the social assessment leading to the objectivisation of the manifestations of pathologies, institutionalisation of various behaviours as pathological ones and ways of their treatment in the social life (J. Kwaśniewski 1991, p.25).

The reasons for creation of social pathologies are attempted to be explained in various theoretical concepts originating from (among other concepts) etiological paradigm, interactive processes or the concept of social control or direction of social control. The most popular concept of the first kind is the concept of Robert Merton originating from the structural and functional trend. This theory describes in what way a normally functioning society may cause or become a ground for pathological behaviours.

The interactive processes resulting in pathological behaviours are the subject of considerations of the theory of the conflict of cultures of Thorsten Sellin, and the concept of diverse ties or relations of Edwin Sutherland. Sellin says that responsible for pathological behaviours are the collision of different culture codes. In turn, in Sutherland's opinion, it is the process of learning pathological patterns of behaviour by the individuals.

In the concept of social control, whose main representative is Travis Hirsch, it is assumed that pathologies arise when the ties of the individuals with the conformist social order are swerved (A. Siemaszko 1993).

The social pathologies are not always assessed negatively. Some researches indicate their positive sides saying that they can create favourable effects for the society (Urban 1997, p. 39 – 42).

Research

The goal of this research was to determine the differences and similarities in the valuations of the phenomena of social pathology by the Austrian and Polish students of pedagogy of Academy of Pedagogy in Gratz and Institute of Pedagogy in Wrocław. The mentioned issue was researched three times: in May 2006, 2007 and 2008 using a group of 150 Austrian and 150 Polish students. The students were to choose (among 35 presented to them and recognized in the literature as possessing pathological characteristics, and 10 pathological phenomena added by them) the most morally reprehensible and socially dangerous ones, so it would be possible to create a list of 30 of them and, then, to classify them in regard to the level of their social disapproval and to determine their dynamics. Outside this, the goal was to name three among the pathological phenomena considered as the most dangerous ones or describe their characteristics, and to indicate the main reasons for their come to being, ways of their control and possibilities of the prevention of their appearing.

The analysis of the results achieved indicates that despite the appearance of certain differences between the opinions concerning indication and valuation of social phenomena considered as pathological ones, the opinions of Austrian and Polish students are very close (see juxtaposition under the text)

Both Polish and Austrian students considered homicide as the most painful and socially dangerous phenomenon, treating it as extremely reprehensible kind of pathology. At the same time, they made it clear that the perpetrators of homicides are, usually, the individuals who are emotionally disturbed, psychopathic, and rather adults than minors. In the category of homicide the Polish students especially often mentioned infanticide underlying the defencelessness of the victims. The Austrian students, in turn, listed the terrorist assassinations often responsible for the deaths of many innocent people.

The Austrian students blamed for all of this intolerance so widespread around the world, considering it as one of the main reasons for the appearance of social pathologies. The Polish students – outside considering as morally unacceptable the child abuse – added that the reason for that is „a production” of the individuals who consider violence as normal in the functioning in the social life.

The Austrian students indicated that in the contemporary world very painful is an increase in pathological behaviours of the sudden character such as aggression and violence, and that these are the most dangerous forms of pathology existing in schools today, especially secondary schools. They also consider mobbing as a permanent element of the school life

describing it as forcing someone to the behaviour hurting the feeling of dignity as well as hurting someone's feelings by spreading rumours, jeering at other views or removing from or preventing the life in a group.

And the Polish students indicated that it is alcoholism, because of its wide reach and occurrence in almost every culture and age group that slowly becomes a natural element of the public and private life being, at the same time, a factor that releases various forms of social pathology also within schools.

Prostitution, both hetero and homosexual, is considered by the Polish and Austrian students as a normal phenomenon that deserves a status of a profession equal with other ones. In the opinion of the Polish students it is dangerous only when it relates to the trade in humans. Similarly assessed was pornography as threatening social order only when it concerns small children or nonconsenting persons.

The counterculture groups functioning in the society are considered by the Polish students as dangerous when the norms to which they subscribe relate to antisocial behaviours, and (by the Austrian students) when they are a manifestation of withdrawal from the social life.

Nicotinism for the Polish students is only an element of the social life that is pathological only in the situation when it threatens non-smokers (passive smokers). For the Austrian students it constitutes a threat in the situation when it is an introduction to reaching for hard drugs.

Interesting is also a separation – both by the Polish as well as Austrian students – of the crime “in general” as a pathological phenomenon, from the crime that is punishable by law. As a crime considered is, for example, corruption, business activities causing disasters, degradation of the legal system or manipulation of the social conscience by the mass media.

They also thought that crime is not a phenomenon that is clearly negative, but it contains also the positive elements since it turns the public opinion to the social problems that constitute a basis for crime and situation of its victims, and not only of the perpetrators.

The students from both countries as the main reason for crime considered, primarily, a low level of economic life of some social classes and unjust social or political systems. They also see it in the disintegration of the family ties demonstrated (for the Polish students, as not is the case for their Austrian counterparts) in divorces, incest and abortion.

Puzzling is, though, that at the same time they do not see a relation between the resolution of problems of pathology and the work of the institutions normally dealing with it

which, in their opinion, function with a total disregard to the wider social needs focusing only on the needs of the persons who demonstrate pathological behaviours.

A similar number of students from both countries think that elimination of pathological phenomena is aided by the inevitability of punishment for them as well as the length and severity of such punishment. Majority of students consider the death penalty a cultural barbarity, there were also the voices that it is a good form of fight with crime or even a necessity that means securing itself, by the society, against the next attacks of incorrigible criminals.

The Polish students did not consider alienation as especially painful a pathological phenomenon. The Austrian students – to the contrary. They thought that it contributes to the creation of the phenomena of the negative social and individual effects such as drug abuse, alcoholism, exclusion, withdrawal, suicide, homelessness and, from the other side, terrorism, violence and aggression. As an important reason of alienation of the contemporary youths they indicated the crisis of values, especially a loss of feeling of belonging to the ethnic, social groups or religious communities. A lack of feeling of belonging to social groups and loss of national roots relates, in their opinion, to the process of globalisation that is responsible for the spread of social pathologies into the new areas.

The Polish student relate social marginalisation of the youths to their resignation from professional ambitions, unemployment, addictions and loneliness leading to the specific form of withdrawal from the social life as is suicide. And the Austrian students do not see manifestation of marginalisation in the participation by the youths in various sects (from the religious to the business ones). To the contrary, they consider it a search, by the youth, for new values that they lacked in the unfriendly world that they know.

A decisive majority of students from both countries think that using drugs should be totally forbidden (with exception of the use for the medical purposes) including a ban on legalisation of any forms of cultivation of poppies or hemp.

The Austrian students consider as totally natural the phenomenon of existence in the world of the unassimilated ethnic groups. They do not see any risk for the European civilisation in the creation of the ethnic enclaves within various countries. In this case they equalise tolerance with consent for the functioning of national minorities more or less on the cultural margins of a given country.

The Polish students, to the contrary, think that the national minorities refusing to adopt the standards of assessments, norms or values in force in a given country or demanding introduction of their own normative systems that are different from the ones prevailing in the

society they live, cause its opposition and, as a consequence, a lack of tolerance and aggression.

A remedy for the dynamics and spreading of pathological phenomena the students see in the promotion in education of a healthy, for individuals, and beneficial, for the society, way of life not only by the mass media but also by the educational institutions.

Conclusions

The research conducted indicates certain changes taking place in the social consciousness in regard to the assessment of pathological phenomena. The pathological phenomena presented in the relevant literature are included in the list prepared by the researched students, and they were supplemented by the new ones they consider as especially bothersome.

A disapproval of the questioned students for pathological phenomena varies depending on the country in which they study and advancement in their studies. The Polish students as decidedly pathological consider the phenomena that threaten the life, family, children, and as less pathological ones the negative phenomena related to the functioning of the society and natural environment. The Austrian students as the most troublesome consider the pathological phenomena related to disorganisation of social life and threat to the lives of individuals.

The ways of explanation of the phenomena of social pathology by the questioned students fit, primarily, the concept of Merton who see their creation in the social structure whose stratifying character makes it impossible for all its members to achieve their goals (that are important culturally) with the use of unpathological means. A low level of life of some social classes and unjust social or political system forces some of the people to conduct the activities that are contrary to the values accepted in a given society. They may take both the forms that are of the asocial as well as antisocial character.

The ways of explanation of the phenomena of social pathology can be found also in the theory of Shuterland that especially accentuates the copying of pathological patterns by the contact with them in primeval groups during the process of communication that has a verbal and non-verbal character. The same can be found in the theory of Hirschi who finds the reasons for pathologies in the loss of the ties of the individuals with their social surroundings of environment.

The theory of Sellin has no practical use in the explanation of the creation of social pathologies in the contemporary world. It would seem that in the era of large emigrations,

globalisation and simultaneous differences (such as ethnic ones) this point of view will find a stronger reflection in the opinion of the questioned students.

The Polish and Austrian students saw positive effects of social pathologies in the cultural change that might take place under their influence in the social structure, since they constitute the means of warning before the effects of unfavourable changes taking place in the contemporary world.

Finale

The images, views and social assessments concerning the phenomena of social pathologies require a constant verification. The knowledge of this subject permits us to try to understand the contents and genesis of the social consciousness. This concerns mainly the institutionalisation in the collective life of the phenomena of social pathology and ways of reacting to them.

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