polish sociological review 3(227)'24
ISSN 1231 – 1413
DOI:10.26412/psr227.01

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Bookworms and Class Wormholes. Public Libraries in the Process of Upward Mobility of Academics in Poland

Abstract: The main aim of this paper is to study the role of books in the biographies of upwardly mobile academics from Poland. The interviewees, despite their working-class background, experienced a major change in their life—they managed to secure an academic post and by doing so, they broke the vicious circle of social reproduction against all the odds. Their biographies are thus examples of "wormholes" between different social classes. A careful analysis of the position of books and the library in these narratives brought the authors' attention to two interrelated findings. The first one supports Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, by emphasising that having books at home (objectified forms of cultural capital) leads to acquiring the embodied form of cultural capital (knowledge and competence), and, in the case of our interviewees, also its institutionalized form (advanced university diploma). Furthermore, books at home created what Bourdieu referred to as a "familiar relation to culture." On the other hand, the empirical material suggests that reading is not universally recognized as a beneficial activity, and—as such—can be a source of interclass tensions. The second main finding points to the role of local libraries and culture-club centres as places where social capital can be acquired by the people who cannot otherwise inherit it. This finding is especially important in the (post)socialist context, where the library was one of the symbols of widening participation in education. The authors argue that the decreasing number of such places poses a threat to upwardly mobile individuals, especially from rural areas.

Keywords: books, Bourdieu, literary competence, public libraries, (post)socialism

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

A long tradition of sociological research suggests that social classes reproduce themselves because, in the vast majority of countries, access to economic resources is so unequal that social mobility is rarely achievable but also due to the non-material dispositions and cultural knowledge. This opens up an interesting question of what happens if someone was able to accumulate only economic *or* cultural capital. As Pierre Bourdieu famously claimed, "Having a million, does not in itself make one able to live like a millionaire" (Bourdieu 1984: 374). Conversely, the accumulation of cultural capital in modern capitalism may lead to precarity (Standing 2014; Frase 2013; Jørgensen 2016). Nevertheless, these situations are rather rare, as all forms of capital are exchangeable, and thus interrelated.

According to the proponents of the theory of social reproduction, in many human societies, the popular classes lack access to legitimate cultural knowledge (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu et al. 1994). This theory appears to be well supported in Poland, where the ethos of the post-gentry intelligentsia serves as a model for the cultural elite identity (Zarycki 2009: 641). Furthermore, classifications made by the intelligentsia "are transferred to other fields, shaping the struggles occurring there," resulting, among other things, in the ridicule of folk religiosity in the religious field or the criticism of populism in the name of political virtue and rationality in the political field (Zarycki and Warczok 2014: 45). Many authors have analysed class-based cultural patterns and lifestyles, both quantitatively (e.g. Janicka and Słomczyński 2017; Domański et al. 2020) and qualitatively. This interest in interview-based and ethnographic research surged notably after 2010, spurred by the works of Maciej Gdula and his collaborators (e.g. Gdula and Sadura 2014).[1]

Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron claim that "what we inherit from our social origins is not only a language but—inseparably—a relationship to language and specifically to the value of language," allowing for verbalizing feelings, opinions and thoughts (Bourdieu et al. 1994: 21). Furthermore, "the divorce between the language of the family and the language of school only serves to reinforce the feeling that the education system belongs to another world" (ibidem: 9). Both the members of the popular class as well as the upwardly mobile "self-made men," as Bourdieu explains, "cannot have the familiar relation to culture which authorises the liberties and audacities of those who are linked to it by birth" (Bourdieu 1984: 331). This theoretical claim explains why the intelligentsia differs significantly from other socio-professional groups in terms of book and magazine readership (Janicka and Słomczyński 2017: 229–230; Kozański 2017: 139). Furthermore, Polish research suggested that readership is only marginally impacted by economic disparity, as it was contingent on the interests imbued in family circles (Janicka and Słomczyński 2017: 231).

Studies in higher education suggest, however, that the books children have at their disposal when growing up can play a crucial role in developing their academic interests (Binns 2019: 58). This is in line with Bourdieu and Passeron's (1994: 5) observation that "the code cannot be learnt except through a progressively less unskilled decoding of messages." Thus, reading can open up "wormholes," to borrow the metaphor from social geography (Sheppard 2002; Kaneff 2013). Having been inspired by the general relativity theory in physics Eric Sheppard (2002) suggested that "when two relatively isolated places become closely connected, meaning that their positionality becomes closely interrelated, then a wormhole opens between them." A very early example of such a "wormhole" was captain Cook's journey to Hawaii, which linked this archipelago with London. This exemplifies how "wormholes" create new connections between "places that once existed as 'separate' social worlds, and this shift[s] their global location as well as their positionality across a variety of other scales" (Kaneff 2013). According to the proponents of this approach, it is worth emphasising two kinds of potentials embraced by this concept: the potential *to connect* social worlds (linking potential) and the potential *to change* social words (transformative potential). By analogy, one can refer to the process of upward mobility as opening up the "wormhole" between two cultural worlds (class cultures), as opposed to two geographical words (countries

[1] For a comprehensive review of Bourdieusian research in Polish sociology, see Dębska (2016).

or cities). Utilizing this concept allows us to elucidate the instances of non-reproduction beyond the "symbolic revolutions" often referenced by Bourdieu. In our conceptualization, wormholes serve as pathways enabling upward mobility.

In this study, we look closely at the process of acquisition of cultural capital through readership in early childhood and adolescence. Based on narrative interviews with upwardly mobile academics, we analyse how they acquired literary competence—which factors helped them and which hindered this process. This question seems to be of crucial importance as Bourdieu (1984) pointed out that "familiar relations to culture" are the mechanism behind the distinction between social classes, and it is literature that has a deciding role in creating linguistic competence (Jankowicz et al. 2014: 66). In other words, it seems crucial to study books and readership in the context of social mobility if books are one of the most important parts of what constitutes cultural capital. Our study suggests that in almost all the analysed cases, familiar relations to books occurred very early, and these formerly popular class individuals had a chance to produce a familiar relation with linguistic culture. Thus, the success of the upwardly mobile individuals, the miraculous "oblates" (Bourdieu 2003), can be at least to some extent explained by the dispositions instilled in them by families, schools, community centers and other institutions. These scholarly dispositions seem crucial as Pierre Bourdieu and Monique de Saint Martin (1994) discussed the use of the university library and demonstrated that "only those students who are better armed scholastically are capable of finding in themselves the resources which the institution should provide for all" (e.g. they actually borrowed books and not just treated the library as a meeting place). This encouraged us to treat libraries, books and other documents (Schreiber 2019) not as mere artifacts but as active co-constituents of their success. The actor-network theory (ANT), another theoretical inspiration (which influenced our thinking although it is not systematically applied in the paper), has long been advocating the agency of non-human beings. The analysis of the place of libraries in the upwardly mobile biographies suggests that books "shape our behavior and in effect delegate to us" (Levy 2003: 32). Overall, while our argument is Bourdieusian in nature, it utilizes the concept of a "wormhole" to tackle the issue of non-reproduction and places emphasis on artefacts as co-creators of symbolic struggles within the academic field.

Public Libraries at the Forefront of Social Change

Before compulsory universal education was introduced in Poland, reading and writing skills were an element of elite education, and most of the society was illiterate. The 1921 census showed that 38.1% of the total rural population in Poland could not read and write (Landy-Tołwińska 1961). After the Second World War, illiteracy in Poland was estimated at 3–3.5 million people, which constituted less than 20% of the total population (Ozymko 2015: 123).

The attempts to popularize reading in disadvantaged communities date back to the interwar period when the concept of district libraries [biblioteki powiatowe] was developed. Their aim was to "provide every citizen with a book, to reach the culturally and educationally backward rural communities" (Budyńska 2010: 5). However, it was

in People's Poland that combating illiteracy became one of the flagship slogans of the communist authorities along with the land reform and the nationalization of industry. The provisions of the Act of April 7, 1949 on the elimination of illiteracy covered basically all citizens from 14 to 50 years of age and had an ideological and political overtone, guided by the logic that "illiterates are and will not cease to constitute the basis of reactionists, in particular of the clergy," while "targeted cultural activities, including 'properly' selected literature can stimulate the desired socio-economic changes in the countryside and change the mentality of peasants." "It was the poor man, close to the 'people's power' in terms of class, who was supposed to look for ways of liberation from poverty and handicap through reading" (Jarosz 2008: 39–40), and the main role in this process of socialist and social change was attributed to libraries and librarians.

Although the original assumptions of the fight against illiteracy had pragmatic and ideological origins, and the peasant class was often reluctant to cooperate,[2] it must be acknowledged that by the end of the 1970s, the illiteracy level fell below 1%. Therefore, the groundwork laid by compulsory primary education, along with access to books in communal libraries in each district (even if books ideologically compatible with the spirit of the party were not as eagerly read as popular literature), became a lever for cultural advancement for the rural masses. The network of libraries in People's Poland was constantly developing, reaching 100% district coverage in 1975, until the systemic change of 1989. Since then, the number of libraries began to decline gradually. Despite the negative trend, what remains valid is that the vast majority of those institutions are still located in rural areas.

Table 1

The number of libraries in Poland 1975–2010

Year	Total	Urban areas	Rural areas
1975	8,974	2,565	6,409 (71,4%)
1989	10,313	3,342	6,971 (67,5%)
1999	9,046	2,996	6,050 (66,8%)
2010	8,342	2,830	5,512 (66%)

Source: The National Library, The Books and Readers Institute reports (Maj et al. 2000, Jezierska et al. 2012).

Table 2

The number of libraries in Poland in 2020

Year	Total	Urban areas	Rural areas
2020	7,782	35%	65%

The statistics for 2020 are given in percentages as the system of reporting had changed and the exact numbers of libraries in urban/rural areas are not provided.

Source: GUS 2021.

[2] Repressive measures were taken against the people who skipped compulsory courses in the form of, inter alia, bringing to the place of study by the use of militiamen, being summoned to authorities, or even being punished with arrest. To increase attendance, the lists of people subject to compulsory basic education were drawn up and then handed over to shop assistants along with an order not to sell any goods to those who did not attend the courses (Jarosz 2008).

In 1992, the National Library started researching readership on a nationwide representative sample of people aged 15 and over. Its annual reports shed light on reading habits and trends. In 2019 (the last representative year before the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown, which due to restrictions completely disrupted and changed people's habits and practices), only 39% of Poles declared that they had read at least one book (per year). As the main sources of obtaining books, readers indicated: purchasing (41%), borrowing from a friend (35%), being given as a gift (31%), borrowing from the library (27%) and one's own book collection (20%). This clearly shows that despite the declining number of libraries, the library is still an important source of obtaining books for almost 1/3 of readers (Biblioteka Narodowa 2019). The numbers provided should be interpreted within the framework of empirical studies examining the patterns of cultural consumption related to social class. Particularly noteworthy is the research indicating that in the 1980s, nearly all the intelligentsia households possessed books, whereas in working-class households approximately one in three lacked them.[3] Moreover, even in the working-class homes where books were present, the collections tended to be modest in size (Kozański 2017: 121–22). This underscores the importance of public libraries for individuals striving for upward social mobility but lacking significant cultural capital in tangible forms.

Although reading is an activity which is usually pursued on one's own, it is at the same time a social practice. It is the family who plays a decisive role in introducing a child to reading, and in maintaining an interest in books, which at a later stage is strengthened (or weakened) by the circle of friends and the peer group milieu.[4] Researchers also point out that although reading books to children is an important part of their cultural socialization, there are factors more strongly correlated with developing reading habits into adulthood practices. According to their importance, these are: encouraging independent reading of books, buying books for children and reading for oneself as a parent. At the same time, it is usually expected that it will be public institutions (schools and libraries) that will work towards the effective elimination of educational and cultural inequalities among children who have no or limited access to reading practice at home (Koryś et al. 2015).

Ironically, since the 1990s, researchers have been observing a growing increase in the percentage of high school and university graduates who do not read books. Their findings also show that among the young people who do not read, statistically, there are more rural residents and people whose parents have not completed higher education (ibidem). This generational shift may be linked to a diminishing sense of shame regarding a decline in reading habits, stemming from the gradual erosion of the symbolic authority traditionally held by the intelligentsia (Janicka and Słomczyński 2017: 232). Another important issue is the gender factor—"in adolescence, the differences between girls and boys increase—especially the boys who come from families with the lowest educational and cultural capital. The weakness of male and boy reading patterns among young men means that not only more and more boys are reluctant to books, but also those who lack support at home find it more

[3] We lack more recent comparative data. Nevertheless, it's worth noting that nowadays, the number of books and their presence serve as weaker indicators of objectified cultural capital. This is because many books are available in digital formats.

[4] In terms of reading practices, we usually resemble our family and friends. 90% of the people who do not read books describe their friends as non-readers, and 86% of these respondents describe their family as non-reading.

difficult to convince themselves to books" (Zasacka 2018: 192). On the other hand, girls are more likely to talk to their friends about books and exchange them with each other.

A rather sad conclusion of the reflections above is that if one comes from a milieu with deficits in the positive transmission of reading patterns, has no books at home and what is more, the local library had been closed, there are rather small chances of cultural upward mobility. Therefore, it was all the more interesting for us where the scholars coming from families without academic traditions learned about books, and how they developed a passion for reading, which constituted for them a lever for educational and cultural advancement and upward social mobility.

Methodology

The analysis and results presented in this article are based on a collection of 25 biographical interviews conducted in 2020–2021 within the project "Culturally Mobile Academics? The Experience of Upward Mobility in the Narrative Perspective". The sample was comprised of academics and lecturers at Polish universities from working-class families who have experienced objective social upward mobility. Coming from families with modest intellectual traditions—parents without higher education,[5] in rural or working-class jobs, often experiencing poverty, where it is usually the manual, not intellectual work that is of high value (Weis 2013)—they managed to achieve success in the academic world.

Due to the lack of official statistics and data on this target group in Poland, the authors decided to collect the research sample based on self-recruitment. The informants signed up for the project in response to an advertisement posted on social media and through the use of our social networks in academia. Looking for participants via social media is an increasingly common technique, especially in the case of hard-to-reach groups (Dusek et al. 2015). We also used paid advertising displayed to Facebook users who met the adopted criteria.

This article is based on the analysis of 11 interviews, which the authors have selected from the entire pool due to the strong presence of threads related to reading.[6] The brief characteristics of these cases are presented in Table 3. This proportion shows that reading was a very popular (11 out of 25 cases) but not a universal theme in the interviews. One of the factors explaining the differences is the academic field—almost all the interviewees selected for this study represented social and humanistic disciplines (10 out of 11 cases) where reading is an intrinsic duty and task.

It is also necessary to elaborate on the interviewees' connection with socialist and post-socialist realities. The interviewees who talked about the role of reading, books and access to public libraries in the course of their social advancement, in fact represent three separate categories of generations, and thus three different types of life experiences:

[5] In 2 out of 25 cases, one of the parents had a university diploma but other circumstances allowed to classify this family as chiefly working-class.

[6] In this paper, we frame the term "library" broadly. We discuss its application in various contexts including urban and rural public libraries, university libraries and culture-club centres—all typically funded with public resources. Additionally, we explore libraries as non-institutionalised sources of obtaining books, such as private home libraries.

1. Born in the 1950s and 1960s (Helena, Andrew), whose education and studies were fully immersed in socialist times, when public libraries were very often the exclusive source of potential knowledge for the working-class children.
2. Born in the 1970s (Mary, Ian, Stan), whose school education took place in socialism, while the period of studies and the development of their scientific career occurred in the period of transformation, where, along with political changes also economic changes took place and the interviewees struggled with difficulties such as unemployment in the family or material poverty.
3. Born in the 1980s and 1990s (Gina, Zack, Nicolas, Tom, Charlie, Nina) who received, at most, a small part of their primary education in the Polish People's Republic. They attended secondary schools during the later transformation period, and the stage of starting and developing their academic careers flourished in a democratic country and in the liberal academia.

Therefore, in this article we formulate statements and conclusions that are based on empirical data both from the period of socialism (in the minority, only two cases) and the vast majority from the period of transformation and post-socialism (nine cases).

Table 3

The interviews used for analysis in this paper—characteristics of the interviewees

No.	**Pseudonym**[a]	**Year of birth**	**Mother's education**	**Father's education**	**Academic degree of the scholar**	**Method of analysis**
1.	Andrew	1966	high school diploma	primary education	Professor of Humanities	2 sessions
2.	Charlie	1984	primary education	primary education	PhD in Social Sciences	2 sessions
3.	Gina	1980	high school diploma	high school without a diploma	PhD in Humanities	2 sessions
4.	Helena	1956	primary education	primary education	PhD in Social Sciences	1 session
5.	Ian	1975	vocational high school	vocational high school	PhD in Social Sciences	2 sessions
6.	Mary	1972	high school diploma	high school diploma	PhD in Humanities	1 session
7.	Nicolas	1983	vocational high school	vocational high school	PhD in Social Sciences	2 sessions
8.	Nina	1990	post-high school	vocational high school	PhD in Humanities	2 sessions
9.	Stan	1976	vocational high school	high school diploma	PhD in Humanities	1 session
10.	Tom	1983	primary education	vocational high school	PhD in Social Sciences	1 session
11.	Zack	1980	high school without a diploma	vocational high school	Professor of Natural Sciences	2 sessions

[a]The interviewees chose their own pseudonyms, which we used both during interpretation seminars and in scientific publications. However, for the English language reader, in some cases, we slightly modified the nicknames to make them more reader-friendly. The motivations for such practice are of two types: 1. ensuring the anonymity of the interviewees; 2. pseudonyms are definitely more readable than markings the cases as e.g. "Female 1," "Male 1", 3. This, in turn, influences the building of a specific relationship between the interviewee-researcher-reader.

Source: our own study.

This article is based on a relatively small sample, which is justified for two reasons. The first is the data analysis strategy described below. In a way which is typical for biographical studies, the researchers analysed in-depth the selected cases, comparing various possible interpretations. This hermeneutic approach would not be applicable to more cases. Secondly, methodological literature is increasingly questioning the assumption that only multi-case studies reveal the truth about the world. George Steinmetz (2004: 384), arguing from the standpoint of critical realism, convincingly undermines both positivist (e.g. the lack of support in statistical methods) and non-positivist (e.g. uniqueness and unpredictability of events) arguments against research on small samples, pointing that "to exclude case studies from the social sciences would mean to exclude explanation from the social sciences." He suggests basing "explanatory case studies" on "demi-regularities" (ibidem). Bent Flyvbjerg (2005: 65) in his famous article debunking the most popular myths about the case study method emphasises that "a discipline of knowledge without a large number of carefully conducted case studies is a discipline that does not systematically create model examples, and a discipline without model examples is ineffective." The cases analysed in this paper are therefore used to help in the development of a model case study.

The narrative interviews were carried out following the assumptions of the Biographical-Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) developed by Tom Wengraf and Prue Chamberlayne (2006). The research participants were asked to tell the story of their life, with an emphasis on the development of their scientific careers. When the spontaneous narration was over, the second session followed during which the moderator asked a few questions about the story, deepening the selected threads which were of particular interest to our research (PINs[7]). The average length of the free narration was between 40 and 120 minutes.

The transcriptions were discussed during the research team's seminars in two ways:

1. Seven interviews were analysed during two sessions (each approx. 4 hours long). The process was as follows: the moderator would prepare the first part of the interview, i.e. the spontaneous narration and during the first session, would present the transcription with biographical facts in chronological order, clearing them of emotional fragments like evaluating or self-theoretical comments. During the second session, the research team analysed the interview according to the chronological order of the story, interpreting the subjective position of the narrator and comparing it with our previous intuitions and observations. After each seminar, the research team members reread the transcript of the entire interview and then wrote an interpretative note.
2. In the case of four interviews, the seminar discussion was conducted in the "classic" approach of Fritz Schütze. The research team met for a one-day session (approx. 3 hours), having previously read the transcripts of both parts of the interview. These seminars consisted of two parts—first each person, in turn, shared their observations and analytical comments, and then in the second part the team discussed possible interpretations of the case. After each seminar, everyone was asked to write an interpretative note.

Below, the authors analyse how the presence of books at home created internal divisions within the working class, and discuss why the reading habit (so much valued in the middle

[7] PINs are Personal Incident Narratives, detailed stories of specific life events.

class world) can be a bone of contention in working-class homes. At the end of the paper, the authors explain the role of the public library in compensating for a family's cultural capital.

Findings

Problem 1: Lack of books (and reading habits)

Even in a purposefully selected sample of "readers," one can see that social class and social habitus matter very much. Based on the lived experiences of the interviewees, they can be divided into:

— 8 narrators from families who instilled in their children a passion for literature and poetry (both directly or indirectly), supported and often created reading habits;
— 3 narrators who developed an interest in books and reading on their own or with the support of facilitators from outside of the family (more about this later in this article), and sometimes against their home background.

The interviewees from the first category usually came from families with "elevated social and cultural capital." The parents of these academics, despite their social background, profession or education, used to read books and newspapers, providing their children with a model to follow and thus arousing their passion for reading. It should be noted that the parents of these interviewees were relatively well-educated—in some cases, they not only had primary or vocational education, but also secondary, and in one case even a diploma of post-secondary education. A subgroup of this category are those interviewees who perhaps did not have access to books in their immediate family home, but they did so at their close relative's place (grandfather, aunt, uncle).

Mary, a doctor of humanities, repeatedly emphasised that she grew up in a family surrounded by many books. Her parents would buy them in huge amounts. When describing her parents, Mary uses the following terms: her mother is a *bookworm*, and her father *successfully hunted books* in the Polish People's Republic. Mary's childhood was *filled with* reading, and in Mary's family home, books were given as Christmas gifts. The interviewee believes that these reading habits helped her a lot in the world of philology, where *reading is at the core*.

> Now I can see the point of it, I was raised among books.. once, I also teach [name of subject] and I always tell my students that some 20 years ago there was such research done in Ireland, longitudinal, in which parents were asked, who had small children, whether there are books in their home. They were not asked at all if they read those books but were asked if there were books and how many, more or less there were. And then it was as if monitored, how the child was doing at school, how, what grades it got, how it got along with the peer group and so on and so forth. And it turned out that of course there was, it was a serious sociological study, so there… disregarding all deviations and other factors, it could be clearly concluded that, that those children who grew up among books, they had this intellectual development facilitated, and it is still so today, which is interesting. So really, I grew up among books.

Another research participant, Gina (PhD in Humanities) just like Mary, comes from a home with "elevated" social capital, or the upper working class. Gina's father ran various small businesses during his professional life, including a bookstore in her small hometown.

It was the father who was a *literature lover* who *made recommendations* of books that Gina should read. It is significant that the interviewee started telling a spontaneous story about her academic career precisely from the thread related to her passion for literature.

Maybe I'll start very early, because, from early childhood, I mean err .. the moment when … I learned to read and I got a book about "King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table." This already sounds not common that this is where an academic story begins, but, but that was the moment which made me forget about the world in a way, for many years. I started reading, books were my world. My parents… actively supported me as much as they could…, my mom… is not particularly a person, who reads a lot, but my dad is a literature lover. I would say of popular, crime, that's true, adventure, and these were the books that, indeed, he was recommending to me.

The third interviewee whose class position can be defined as higher in relation to the typical working class is Nina (PhD in Humanities). Nina's mother had post-secondary education and worked in a profession requiring at least medium qualifications (a laboratory analyst). Nina's mother took her regularly, every few weeks, to the public library, where they borrowed the maximum number of books allowed, and thus stimulated Nina's interest in reading.

My mother always read books. And she always read a lot of books. Admittedly, it wasn't probably the kind of literature that we would now value… romance novels, some kind of popular literature, etc.… she always read a lot of that… Until today, there is [in her mother's home]a pile of books from the public library, standing there. And my mother has always been going there, I don't know, every three weeks she borrowed eight books or however many were allowed. Anyway, very quickly, my mother started taking me to this library, I loved reading, various books, to this day I like it, although I may not have as much time as I would, I would like to have, but I like it very much. Reading books.

Books played a key role also in developing Helena's (PhD in Humanities) humanistic interests. What is striking in her narrative and differentiating it from earlier accounts is the fact that she was bought books by her parents, who themselves had only primary education. Despite this, the literary canon was present at home, and Helena's father, a farmer by profession, read both newspapers and books.

So, at home, there were books, which is not so common in peasant families. My father had a bamboo bookcase and there were, I don't know, twenty books… more or less. And it was so important for me. I also remember where they were standing.

Similar conditions prevailed in Ian's family (PhD in Social Sciences), who also had books at home. Ian's mother, a manual factory worker, read a lot, although these were mainly crime stories and popular literature. Ian's parents signed him up for the library when he was a few years old. The interviewee, reconstructing his life story, points out that although the world of books was such a natural world, it was only at university that he read the classics of literature e.g. Shakespeare. Nevertheless, despite having learned to read already in kindergarten and later reading a lot, Ian had cultural deficits because he did not have contact with the literary canon which is natural for the middle class. These shortcomings constituted a problem, inter alia, in getting into the chosen field of study.

I don't know if this was very unusual, maybe not so unusual in [region of Poland], but there were books in our house. Now, in working-class families, there are hardly any. There could have been more books in those days. It was popular literature, of course, my father read a lot of this. My mother read some romance novels. For me, this world of books was such a natural world. Well, there was a lot of talking about the need to read books, so my parents signed me up quite early for the children's library and I would read these books regularly.

Despite his class background and the lack of education, Charlie's (PhD in Social Sciences) father obtained and recommended to him books on historical and adventure topics, and once even prepared Charlie for a poetry recitation competition. Charlie, a child raised in a working-class housing estate, could read fluently at the age of five, which was quite rare.

Indeed, I learned to read fluently quite quickly, I was about five years old. So I, from then on, I read, I read some let's say longer stories and not necessarily kids' fables (…) and if I did read fables, these were rather fairy tales because I remember that I read [Hans Christian] Andersen quite early… Surprisingly, I was also crazy about such, marine fiction […] And this education appeared quite quickly. Firstly, I was such, I read faster than my peers, my parents were very pleased with me. I got labelled as such an intelligent, gifted child and it simply got confirmed in primary school.

In the family home of Tom (PhD in Social Sciences), Andrew (Professor of Humanities) and Zack (Professor of Natural Sciences) even if there was no culture of reading at home, books were available in a close relative's house.

Tom recalls that in the house left by his emigrant aunt, he discovered in the attic several dozen different books. The first one he read at the age of 7 was *Medallions* by Zofia Nałkowska [on the subject of the Nazi death camps].

And there was such large attic [in the emigrant aunt's house] and generally books, and, I don't know, the first book I read when I was maybe seven, it was *Medallions* (laughs) by Zofia Nałkowska, and it made such an impression on me, ok, I read all the books there, it was probably about fifty books, I don't know why, I can't remember, because this aunt had been gone for a long time. They were all related to Auschwitz. They were in some way on that subject.

Zack was raised by a single mother, as his parents had divorced when he was a young child. This translated into financial hardship, so even though his mom did read books, it was a rare sight as she had to work long hours to support the family. It was Zack's grandfather who created the first window of literary opportunity—the retired man had military post-secondary education and used to be a lecturer in an officer's school, and there was a library in his house. As a 7- or 8-year-old child, Zack would peruse the shelves and find fascinating books like a high school textbook in astronomy, the encyclopedia, or the dictionary. Zack recalls that he was often bored during the summer holidays because they couldn't afford to travel much so he had to find himself some alternative diversion:

There was literature in his [meaning: the grandfather's] house. For example, there was also a book that influenced me tremendously, which is an interesting thing, well, you will laugh, but it was a dictionary of foreign words and (…) thesaurus, something like that. And I would just flick through this dictionary. And just … because I found words that I didn't, didn't know, and, and I was very interested in it. It was even a bit exciting, getting to know words, words that others don't use. I was very individual when I was young. I was just trying to stand out in this way too. So I found this book on astronomy at my grandfather's, I found it and … grandfather had an encyclopedia, I mean, I would sit down and flick … flick through this encyclopaedia. […] Sometimes he would recommend something to me.

Andrew (Professor of Humanities) as a child was passionate about reading (*I just loved reading, anything*), yet was not able to pursue this passion at home. He would spend a lot of time with his uncle's family (an intellectual part of the family) where he learned about ancient history and with the neighbours from the same block of flats, where he read

the bound volumes of *Przekrój* (a social and cultural magazine) and the *Great Universal Encyclopedia*.

In contrast to the cases of Helena, Mary, Gina, Ian, Charlie and Nina discussed above, the other category of interviewees emphasised that in their home, there were no books, no home library nor even the habit of reading fairy tales to children. This is one of the possible distinction markers within the working class. Reading practice and familiarity with (some) books, not necessarily the canon ones, made some families cultural capitalists, the dominant among the dominated. The availability of books at the home of a relative (Tom and Zack) was an in-between position. The dominated among the dominated (Andrew and Nicolas) had to, in turn, find other sources and reading resources on their own.

Stan's story is especially meaningful, as it illustrates all the contradictions of early working-class socialization. Stan, when he bought a book without his mother's permission was afraid of her harsh, critical reaction, yet his fears proved to be exaggerated. Years later, the interviewee reconstructs his thoughts at that time:

I remember when I was a little child and she [the mother] sent me to the store to get washing powder and I, instead of that powder, I bought two books. And I was dragging myself back home because I was afraid of her reaction, and then she said that I could be sure of one thing, that I would never be criticized by her for buying myself a book.

The supportive attitude of Stan's mother (a seamstress by profession) towards his passion for books can be interpreted as demonstrating an element of a habitus typical of the middle class, though it is hard to imagine a middle-class child who would be afraid to buy books. The fact that the mother supported Stan is, thus, a middle-class feature, but his doubts are certainly not. This story suggests that even if working-class parents support their children's intellectual passions, they do not do that in an intentional way. In many working-class families, even if there is a home library, it is neither a big nor a carefully chosen collection, and if reading is tolerated, it is not strongly encouraged, or not stimulated from an early age.

Problem 2: Reading as the source of intra-class tensions

Tom, Andrew, and Nicolas, despite the differences in their access to books, have one thing in common—they were all forced to read in secret. In their environment, this way of spending time was considered to be an idle pursuit, a waste of time, and in the case of men, a strictly gendered activity—not a desirable task for the "real working men." Tom recalls that his parents looked with disapproval at his constant reading.

On the one hand, my parents couldn't tell me not to read, cause I didn't drink alcohol, I didn't smoke, I just wanted to read. It's a bit silly to say, right? It was a bit… My parents started to use it [reading] in such a way that you can read to yourself once you've helped on the farm. So even reading was on such condition, that, um, I did not have free time to study or read. After coming back from school, the first activity was, it was to help on the farm. (…) I remember that my greatest joy was when it was raining and then I could just read … yeah, I had such a.. kind of my room, on the first floor. And I could just simply read there. Madness.

Andrew, who we refer to many times in this article, initially even experienced physical violence on the part of his father. It was only when his parents realised that reading was a chance for a better professional future for their son, they accepted that Andrew buys, collects and reads books.

Then they accepted that I buy books, that I collect them, that I compose my library and so on. After the fifth grade of primary school, the matter had already changed, and they even started accepting it. Probably, they saw that it can be a way of helping me. On the other hand, when I corrected them, their linguistic mistakes, well, they probably must have felt hurt sometimes.

Nicolas (PhD in Social Sciences) experienced the best period of his life only after leaving his family home village and moving to a boarding school in the city. He finally had time for quiet study and careful reading. At home, every moment outside the school, he was expected to work on the family farm. During high school, the library became a second home for Nicolas.

Here, in the boarding school, there was time and that's why I started reading newspapers, books. I liked the library a lot. For me, it was the best place where I would spend a lot of time when I came back from school. I think that thanks to Ms Margaret, who.. she would always stress not to… She would always repeat: if you return there [to the family home], you will return as a different person, but you will not return, because you will not find yourself there, in the reality of the world from which you had come out.

We have already seen that working-class children encounter two kinds of problems when it comes to acquiring scholastic dispositions (Bourdieu 2003) in the form of reading habits: the lack of books and the lack of role models. For this reason, institutional support for children's readership plays a crucial role in crossing social classes, as it can be a remedy for the two problems.

Libraries as a Remedy for the Lack of Books and Role Models

For the narrators who did not have too many books at their disposal at home, or as in some cases, did not have any books during their childhood and adolescence, access to the public library turned out to be of crucial importance. Thanks to the system of public libraries in each commune in the Polish People's Republic, children from the working class had the opportunity to have contact with literature not only metaphorically but also physically. Moreover, local libraries were the places where social climbers could meet much-needed role models.

During the interview, Andrew stated clearly that he was a beneficiary of the socialist times. He emphasised egalitarian access (in both financial and class aspects) to free education and public libraries. The narrator is well aware that it is thanks to formal education, with the support of the library system and reading clubs, that he has advanced from the working class to the middle class.

Free public libraries, in my opinion, this is what made me who I am. Education, which is also about the fact that there are such things as culture-club centers, public libraries, local libraries, well, you know, perhaps today it is underestimated, but I do appreciate them. I mean, I think that although I was anti-communist then, and I still think that communism is not the best solution, I would be a stupid man, if I denied the good sides of that system, in the sense that, you know, general education, elimination of illiteracy, universal health care and so on. I am not praising the People's Republic of Poland, heaven forbid!

During the free narration, Andrew spoke on the topic of reading several times in different contexts. As a little boy, he started from the local library in the neighbourhood,

and after some time, when he had already consumed all the content intended for his age, the librarian directed him to the pedagogical library. He also had contact with books in his uncle's and neighbour's houses. Therefore, when recalling significant books, he mentions diverse titles: a popular comic book *Tytus, Romek i Atomek*, an academic book *Schizophrenia* by Antonii Kępiński, the weekly, opinion-forming magazine *Przekrój*, which he read at his neighbour's, or books in the field of existential philosophy. The interviewee says that he had created his own library from scratch, without adequate resources and family background, and that the encyclopaedia which was at his neighbors' he would read for entertainment.

I mean, well, as I say, in my, there were no books to read in my home, right? I mean, (…) my library was the first one. I mean, I was building the library from scratch. True, I got the first book from my parents, it was some, some astronomy textbook, (…) when I was, I think, five years old (…) then it was popular to read, well, *Tytus, Romek i Atomek* [a popular comic book] and so on. But of course, then I started reaching for more advanced things. Especially then, when I reached for existential philosophy, then somehow then I started collecting. And then, you know, contrary to popular belief, at the end of the People's Republic, a lot was published there then. I mean, somehow… despite the censorship, despite, well, you could read, sometimes more ambitious things.

Andrew also recalls a lucky encounter, when a friend introduced him to a charismatic teacher, who also happened to be running a drama club. He invited Andrew to their meetings and would offer him opposition literature and books officially banned by the regime.

Zack (Professor of Natural Sciences) says that he had always been fond of books, and already in elementary school whenever he was bored, he would go to the library where he would borrow more and more books of all sorts — fiction, popular science. Turning to books and reading to kill excess free time had become a healthy habit that would pay off in the future. When he was about 12, he recalls the first time he was stuck at home during the whole summer and all his friends had left on vacation:

I already had textbooks for the seventh grade. And that's when physics and chemistry come in for the first time. And there was a shuttle on the cover of the physics book. I read this physics textbook from cover to cover.. and going into the seventh grade (…) I just got A after A in physics. Because it fascinated me so much. I immediately learned it all.

He says he would read books "in great volumes." A moment of joy was when he won a local competition and the prize was 13 popular science books, which otherwise he would have never been able to afford. He sums up by saying:

I was really fascinated by that, that there are so many possibilities, so many interesting phenomena. . and I decided then that I want to become a scientist.

Tom (PhD in Social Sciences) says he fell in love with reading, signed up to the library to look for new titles, and would choose it over spending time with classmates:

I remember that my friends after school, and they would be waiting for some bus back to their villages, that they would go somewhere, I don't know, hang around, whatever… We had one hour. Then I, I often said, oh no, I have to go somewhere, whatever, do something else, and then I would sneak out to the library.

Naturally, the interviewees who did have relatively good access to books at home also took keen advantage of the library resources.

Helena, whose case was discussed earlier, apart from using the resources of her father's "bamboo bookcase" full of classics of Polish literature, was also a frequent visitor to the public library. For her—the oldest interviewee born in the late 1950s—as well as for a slightly younger Andrew, the institution of the library was of great formative importance.

And then there was the library, where you could go to. And I read an awful lot. We had no other ways of spending our free time. Well, books were something important, but of course, not everyone would read. I just devoured books. I devoured whichever books were possible and available to borrow. But I think that in general children used to read more in the past. I was recently telling my daughter, for example, how we worked with my friends in the summer. picking currants. It is not particularly hard work, but it is boring. There was a whole group of girls and we would tell each other about the books we read. Because you had to do something when picking currants, you had to talk. We read Jackiewiczowa, Fleszarowa-Muskat [surnames of authors], these kinds of nice books. We would tell each other about the books we had been reading … It was like today in reading clubs, then we had reading clubs by the currants.

Gina (much younger than Helena), who grew up in the 1990s, in the period after the political transformation, emphasised that she *was just growing up in the library. I live in a small town, … with teachers who I have fond memories of*. Apart from the, so to say, impersonal library institution, a significant actor was the casual figure of the librarian who, *seeing what was happening*, offered Gina subsequent books from *the history of French literature*, which Gina had been fascinated with since adolescence.

I also had access to the library at the school I attended. It was a fantastic place, I could browse the books and this is not only my story, it's also the story of my friends who went to the same school. I could rummage through the shelves, which sometimes ended badly, because, oh, when I was 11, I read Albert Camus's *Plague* and for many years I remembered the description of rats dying by the rubbish containers.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the light of the reproductive mechanisms present in most societies, it is hardly surprising that social mobility is a rather infrequent phenomenon. Nevertheless, some people are able to overcome the life trajectory typical for their social class. Creating such inter-class "wormholes" is not an easy task, and is often accompanied by social suffering (Riemann, Schütze 1991; Schütze 1997; Kleinman et. al 1997; Renault 2010). We argue that one of the explanations of such a possibility is the familiar relation with literary culture since childhood. Certainly, this is not the only possible avenue of upward mobility and other factors such as the support of significant others (e.g. extended family, colleagues, mentors) or institutions (e.g. schools) may also contribute to social promotion. However, our study has suggested that it was thanks to books that the formerly working-class individuals had a chance to develop and produce a familiar relation with culture relatively early on. Thus, supporting reading culture is one of the means facilitating upward mobility. Nonetheless, this is not the only way to support social advancement and, as a result, make the higher education system more egalitarian (since we did not analyse the biographies of upwardly mobile non-readers here) and it is certainly a daunting task.

Acquiring book culture through the family environment is, as Bourdieu suggested, the most typical route to accumulating cultural capital. In the case of our interviewees, this cultural transfer was possible in those families where parents had elevated social capital

and were the first reading role models. Had they been born a generation later or in other life circumstances, they could have possibly had higher academic achievements. They were book readers themselves and would buy their children books or sign them up for the local libraries. These circumstances, as we pointed out, were privileged when contrasted with the homes where books were unavailable or young readers were discouraged from reading (or even punished for it). This created a sharp distinction within the working class—a "reading" family was an asset, making this fraction more similar to the middle class.

If someone's family situation was not that favourable, the person could still count on significant others—relatives or the neighbours who had books at home, and made them available to the future class climbers. The presence of such people in their social networks was, however, a matter of pure chance, similarly to the uncertain support of teachers, mentors or librarians, who seeing the interviewees' passion for reading, would actively support it by recommending certain books, and offering advice.

In light of unequal access to books among the working class and the extremely diverse attitudes toward reading culture, easy and egalitarian access to public libraries (not just those at schools) in the area of living seems to be crucial for making upward mobility more attainable. In this perspective, libraries constitute the non-human actors facilitating upward social mobility and academic success. For this reason, it is also not without significance that except Nina, who was the youngest research participant, all the academics were born in socialist Poland and the formative period of their childhood and youth was in the pre-capitalist times. In those days, libraries were numerous, books and reading along with sports and spending time with peers were the main sources of entertainment, while cable TV, the Internet and mobile phones did not exist. However, even Nina, who was born in 1990 so at the very beginning of the post-socialist era, had a chance to experience her early childhood in cultural conditions similar to the other interviewees.

Reading is a solitary activity requiring time and concentration, which is becoming increasingly difficult in times when it is common (or expected) to multi-task, even in the case of leisure pursuits (e.g. listening to music while doing sports, or using social media, texting with friends while watching an online show). Additionally, the growing importance of the visual culture, especially for the younger generations means that the chances of developing the habit of relatively regular reading of books are possibly lessened. The habit which translates into permanent reading attitudes in adulthood, and as the authors have demonstrated, can be the lever to upward social mobility.

Towards the end of the first decade of the 21st century, as capitalism started offering more entertainment options, books and reading had to "compete" with social media, the Internet, and a wide range of TV programs (also available on Internet platforms and smart phones). Therefore, one could put forward a hypothesis about the generational factor, which assumes that the upward mobility of generations raised during socialism and right after the democratic transition will be different from the mobility of the generation raised in the post-communist neo-liberal reality. The authors argue that the progressive decline in the number of public libraries will additionally contribute to the limiting of this way of social upward mobility. One countermeasure, however, could be to put emphasis on popularizing reading among young people, and making reading an attractive alternative again, e.g. by

developing modern media centres. Whereas reducing the number of public institutions will surely bring the opposite effect.

In the second decade of the 21st century, the book and the paper press have already ceased to be the only carriers of the broadly understood "culture of the written word." These days we would rather speak of practices of digital culture, which were greatly advanced by the Covid-19 pandemic and resulted in an accelerated acquisition of digital competencies. In this context, one may ask, why are libraries of such importance? A short answer is that the library is not only a place where one can find books but also meet people and acquire social capital. Just as in the times of youth of the research participants born before the 1990s, reading books was an egalitarian leisure activity, in the 21st century, watching movies and series is a much more egalitarian and accessible pastime, often free of charge. It is also more "fit" to modern times as watching usually does not require so much attention, and can be easily combined with other simultaneous activities. However, it seems to be far less important in training the scholastic dispositions required in academic work (Bourdieu 2003). How this will affect the chances of upward mobility for the next first-generation academics, remains to be researched.

Funding

National Science Centre Poland, UMO-2019/35/D/HS6/00169.

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