

**Elżbieta Siarkiewicz: *The Veiled Areas of Counselling.*  
*Realities – Illusions – Ambivalences,*  
University of Zielona Góra, 2010, pp. 227**

Elżbieta Siarkiewicz's latest book is unique in counselling literature for a variety of reasons. For readers less familiar with modern scientific literature, who are accustomed to traditional publications, written in the classic style, which attaches great importance to the formal requirements of so-called 'scholarship' with all the clichés associated with this, the schematic structure of the content and 'objective' language – this publication might be a big surprise and a breath of fresh air. It will probably also be accompanied by a sincere admiration for the style of the author and undisguised astonishment that one can write about counselling in this way and that this also can be a science.

The author takes us with her – as befits the approach of a hermeneutic advocate – on an intriguing journey through time and space to the various worlds of counselling (the plural here is very adequate – because there is not, as we will have the chance to thoroughly ascertain, only one world of counselling). She guides us through them like the mythical Hermes, an experienced guide equipped with a thorough knowledge of their various hidden mysteries (these are titled 'veiled areas'). At the same time, she brings to mind the character of an older sister, introducing us to the meanders of the unknown (veiled) world so far, patiently, slowly, but with great passion (noticeable at every turn) explaining its intricacies. She is just the wise counsellor. This is an unusual art – to describe counselling in a truly 'counselling way', from the inside, from being permeated and immersed in it. This is what she describes as 'immersion ethnography'. As one of the reviewers, Józef Kargul notes – which is rightly highlighted on the cover of the book – *constructing an immersion model of counselling study is an important contribution by the author to the development of counsellogy as a field of science, focused on research of counselling processes. What model is this?*

Let us use the author's voice, who describes it as 'an attempt to diverse penetration and permeation through counselling worlds. It is an attempt to immerse in counselling practice. It is also a reference to what was previously a French 'observation' and American (later British) 'participation' (p. 35). Siarkiewicz takes us to such places, spaces and times where counselling practice 'happens' and that typically we do not associate with this kind of practice at all. She pulls back (sometimes, simply,

as she calls them, 'transparent' – *diaphanes*) curtains for us, behind which, appears a different (?) (unknown, unnoticed, overlooked in a rush, hidden?) counselling reality. We wander through the various nooks and crannies of aid institutions, we look into offices, we read counselling texts written in social spaces, for instance on the walls of school toilets, texts written in the media or in human memory. The author sees and shows us that counselling is going on almost everywhere, and from time immemorial. She often refers to – and this thread runs through the whole book – specific reference sources as the ancient Oracle at Delphi (not coincidentally, of course, in this way, the symbolism of the road and the journey, takes on additional clarity). We travel not only in space, but also in time. Siarkiewicz – in accordance with the interpretative paradigm, in which she situates her work – tells us that to know and understand *something* you can do this only and exclusively in the perspective of space-time – everything is inseparably linked to its time and its place.

Not by accident, I have often tried to refer to different kinds of metaphors: travel, wandering, guide, an older sister in this review, for metaphor is – as befits its quality, a soft analysis – a key design feature of this work and also a tool to describe the world. In an attempt to truly present the reader with 'the atmosphere and spirit' of the book, I inevitably direct myself towards metaphorical language. However, in metaphors lies the danger – as Elżbieta Siarkiewicz reminds us, that they can hide 'inconvenient' ambiguities. However, when it comes to this work, we can relinquish all such fears, here a metaphor performs its function – above all, by analogy, to help us to see and understand reality better. It reveals, not hides. I hope that the metaphors invoked in this review will have a similar effect.

Wandering with the author, we get to know her research path and therefore, another dimension of space-time. Her struggles with research material, uncertainty, fascinations and discoveries are also evident. Research procedure resembles the 'hermeneutical circle' or, as she puts it, a 'hermeneutical spiral'. Best described by the following passage:

*This research covers eight years of work. It came from a vaguely outlined idea, still incomplete at the time. The first data was collected in pre-study material and induced a return to reading, to in-depth analysis and thus allowed the pre-ordering of it. This gave rise to new questions. Then going back again to the research, to new analysis of the collected material, returning to work with various publications and the subsequent attempts of constructing descriptions and interpretations. This cycle was repeated several times, forming a hermeneutic spiral, where every time new facts showed up, new contents and new analysis were made, and new interpretations put forward (p. 34).*

This was the way in which the immersion model of counselling studies has been developed, for which this spiral is fundamental. It is structured for analytical purposes by the three separate planes of the author's research interests and her

reflections, which are cut by this spiral ribbon – areas where counselling practice ‘happens’: generality, everyday life and intimacy.

I feel that this distinction is not entirely clear and consistent. Siarkiewicz writes:

*The subject of my research is therefore counselling practice, which ‘happens’, ‘is set’ and ‘hides’ in the generality, everyday life and personal experiences. The practice of counselling, sometimes becomes the identifiable area of everyday life (it is personal), and sometimes it becomes a space of social life (it is common) (p. 32).*

I see a definitional problem here. A question emerges as to which one of these planes is the personal sphere: the area of intimacy, or daily life, or maybe both. In addition, is it understood correctly that everyday life is not common? Alternatively, maybe the same practice becomes both an everyday experience and a common one, depending on the context. It seems that the latter interpretation is closest to the intentions of the author, but I think this whole issue should be related to the ongoing dispute in social sciences over the placing of the subject, manifesting itself especially in the so-called ‘theories of subjectivity’, in the context of discussions about *agency*. On the one hand, we traditionally have supporters of the location of it within the structures that determine social reality, social systems; on the other hand, we have representatives of a position, according to whom subjectivity is inherent in operating individuals, the actors of social life. Increasingly, voices can be heard saying that both of these views are wrong, that they describe only a part of reality, and subjectivity is located in relations. These sentences reflect the distancing from Aristotelian substantialism, which has been dominant in western culture. Norbert Elias, for example, writes: *One must give up thinking in terms of a separate substance, and start thinking in terms of relations and functions* (cf. Sztompka, Bogunia-Borowska 2008, p. 23). Pierre Bourdieu says that *‘the real is relational’: what really exists in the social world are relations – not interactions or intersubjective ties between actors, but the objective relations that exist, as Marx would say, ‘regardless of the will and consciousness of individuals.’* (Bourdieu, Wacquant 2006, p. 76). Randal Collins writes: *It is necessary to avoid the mistake of equating the subject with the entity, even if we operate at the micro level* (cf. Sztompka, Bogunia-Borowska 2008, p. 33). The individual is of course a real being, but only in the biological sense (physical existence), in terms of social, psychological and cultural a being is merely an abstraction – they do not exist outside the social context, but along with other individuals, they constitute the context, but do not do it independently. Piotr Sztompka, reconstructing these disputes in sociology, speaks of its successive incarnations: the first, second and third, the latter called ‘the sociology of everyday life.’ He writes:

*Focus attention on the objects and processes of social par excellence over the individual, typical of the first type of sociology and focus attention on individuals and their activities in abstraction from the social context, typical of the second*

*type of sociology, it becomes complete in the sociology of the third type with the analysis of what Zbigniew Herbert poetically called 'interpersonal space', which means a network of multidirectional relationships between individuals. Such a network is, in other words, an individual-social field, constantly changing and flowing, being in the process of constant becoming. Searching for the ultimate social "substance", whether in a holistic and individualistic version, is enriched by the relational and dynamic perspective (ibid., p. 23).*

The subjects that have a driving force are not social structures or individual subjects that are working in the context of those structures. The driving force comes from the relations between them ('the third level of social reality', an individual-structural field – Sztompka 2007, p. 530). This field is a causative intermediary factor (*agent*). This relational subjectivity constitutes a foundation for many of the latest key social theories, such as, for example, Bourdieu's field theory, Sztompka's concept of an individual-social field mentioned above and Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration. I cannot find traces of these disputes mentioned above in Siarkiewicz's book. She refers, in fact, to Giddens's theory of structuration, but does so briefly, extracting only threads of space-time, particularly 'regionalization' and the concept of 'becoming' – but does not fully utilise the significance of this theory. I think that a more in-depth reference to 'the theory of subjectivity' would have more accurately resolved the definitional problems mentioned earlier, or even avoided them. The subject of research would become counselling practice (as defined by Sztompka a 'social event', these events create, 'become' an individual-structural field) 'happening' and 'located' in relations between the areas of generality, everyday life and intimacy, in all of these areas at the same time, because – as stated by Elias – *society produces not only what is similar and typical, but also what is individual* (cf. Sztompka, Bogunia-Borowska 2008, p. 31).

*In fact, an individual and the context surrounding them do not exist separately (and so, by analogy, counsellor, counselee and context) – these aspects exist together, simultaneously, as an integrated whole. I think that this statement carries enormous potential, which has not yet been exploited in counsellogy. For this reason, I do general allegation for counsellors and humanists at all, especially educators still searching for substantiality, dividing reality, often viewing the reality as the either-or, either subjectivity or objectivity, even if the context is perceived, as either global or local, often 'giving off' the individual either way. 'In fact, at the level of everyday life what is individual and what is social, separate individual and connected, relational network between individuals, appear to be inextricably linked and analytically only distinguish aspects of a constantly changing individual-social field (ibid., p. 32).*

Fortunately, Elżbieta Siarkiewicz consciously uses the analyticity and conventionality between the areas of generality, everyday life and intimacy and this

division makes it easier and more organized, understandably it leads to reflections and also helps to 'stop' counselling practice (often literally on presented photographs). It does not change the fact, that in her analysis, I miss the treatment of those three planes as one inseparable whole, which they are. The fact that they are is not clearly highlighted at all. At the end, we read:

*Separation of the mentioned areas of counselling practice is virtual and accepted only for theoretical considerations. However, it allows for a more transparent exhibiting of the intention to describe what is extremely complex and very diverse. Counselling reality from these isolated areas creates a mutually overlapping, interpenetrating and intertwining structure (p. 213).*

Well, we still do not see that these areas constitute an indivisible whole; at most, they overlap, interpenetrate and intertwine. Finally, especially in view of the above claims about subjectivity – personal (individual, intimate) is general (social) and *vice versa*, and the area in which you can best see it, where all these processes are focused, is just everyday life.

Let me, as if summing up these broad considerations presented here, stress their importance by citing as described by ethnomethodologists (to whose experience Siarkiewicz particularly relates), the phenomenon of Interactive Vandalism (Giddens 2006, p. 111). This perfectly illustrates the indivisibility of social reality and shows the danger of ignoring the impact of social relations on a larger scale (e.g., such as capitalism or patriarchy), on the shape of the observed phenomena, even on the seemingly autonomous interactions between units on the micro-level, and the very frequent counselling relationship between counsellor and counselee. We can see in this an example, which can lead to a skipping of issues in the analysis of the counselling situations, issues such as gender, social class or ethnicity. Interactive Vandalism refers to a situation where a person with a lower social status violates tacit rules for everyday interactions that are important to a person of higher status, for example, construction workers embarrassing dignified women passing by the construction site. In such situations, we may well see this inseparability of multi-level social reality. Here is an extensive quotation from Giddens, which is his comment on the matter:

*Carol Brooks Gardner in her study Passing by. Gender and Public Harassment (1995) shows that in such undesirable interactions (...) women often feel insulted. While teasing one woman can be analyzed in terms of micro-sociological, as a single case of interaction, limiting it to such a view of the matter is not sufficient. (...) This type of interaction cannot be understood without reference to the broader cultural context of gender hierarchy. Here we see the interrelated micro- and macro analysis. Gardner made a connection between harassing women by men and a broader system of inequalities associated with gender manifesting in the privileged position of men in the public sphere, their physical superiority and*

*the omnipresent threat of violation. Without grasping the connection between micro-and macrosociology our understanding of these interactions would be very narrow. It might seem that they are isolated cases, which can be eliminated by teaching people good manners. Noticing the relationship between macro and micro level enables us to understand that in order to tackle the problem at the level of the relevant reasons, we must focus on the elimination of those forms of inequality related to gender, which lead to such interactions (ibid., p 104).*

Elżbieta Siarkiewicz attaches great importance to the context and is very attentive and sensitive to cultural aspects. She devotes a great deal of space to the analysis of ambiguity in counselling, especially the dimensions of time, space, power, and interculturalism. Delving into these recesses with the author is indeed one of the greatest pleasures, as the reader will find when reading this book. Discovering them for us, she also makes us aware of the dangers, understatements, and various 'secrets' that appear there. This is a really exciting experience, a captivating journey to develop imagination. However, she has devoted little space to issues such as gender or social status. As if a counselee and a counsellor do not have gender (although about the role of the body, creating the image of the adequate body to market demands, she writes quite broadly), and also a social position and associated complications affecting the process of counselling interaction. The importance of this context we can see in the above quoted commentary of Giddens. To what sort of 'impolicies' it may lead, the following passage might illustrate. Writing about the construction of identity among others by giving them a professional 'name', taking into account the contexts of discrimination based on gender and race (the body), the author also creates this string of professions' names: 'teacher, educational consultant, **saleswoman**, engineer, assistant technician, director, counsellor.' (p. 192). In another place, she lists: 'salesmen, **secretaries**, staff lounges fashion (...), actor, models, athletes, woodcutters, miners,' (p. 198). The inconsistency of naming, conveying hidden tacit assumptions here is too apparent. Many probably say that this is a detail not worth stressing, but given the cultural sensitivity of the author, which manifests itself in so many other areas of counselling, (so she just 'suspended the bar' very high in this regard); you would expect continuing vigilance in any event. The more that she is aware – often manifests it – meaning of language in constructing social reality, if only by giving these "names". Insufficient attention is paid to the hidden dimension of gender, spontaneously revenging itself in this way.

The second criterion of narrative structuring – apart from that described in the first criterion of 'position', 'a location of the practice of counselling towards an entity' (p. 213), which enabled the author to separate the three areas described above (intimacy, everyday life and universality) – is the criterion, as she defines, 'the venue of counselling implementation, the venue where counselling creates, happens and concludes itself. Therefore, formal counselling (institutionally established, determined by assumptions, objectives, functions), non-formal (located at various

institutions as an additional activity) and informal (happening in the surrounding reality, in everyday life) appeared' (p. 213). This division of the ground of 'the place of implementation' – penetrating the first division according to the criterion of 'position' – constitutes the main axis of this book. Note that this structure is very clear, and this is not always common in the case of publications that situate their research and analysis in the interpretive paradigm. The author herself expresses such concerns; however, we can assure her that they are unfounded. The clarity of this book both in its construction and in considerations is undoubtedly a great advantage of this work.

In the first chapter, we get an original approach to the synthesis of the nature of the research conducted so far in counselling, divided into those in search of epistemological certainty, and secondly, those being reconciled with the lack of it. The first is conducted in a positivist paradigm, the latter from interpretive and critical positions. The author herself definitely belongs to this second trend. It is from this perspective that the context of counselling, the variety of hidden dimensions and ambiguities (power, violence, manipulation, etc.) are recognised.

The second chapter describes the methodological framework of understanding insight into counselling. Here we meet the views of the author – adorned with rich references to literature – the way of studying and understanding counselling reality. Elżbieta Siarkiewicz especially reconstructs the ethnographical, ethnological and etnometodological orientations in this chapter. She refers to the method of conversation analysis and visual sociology perspective.

In the third chapter, we have the opportunity to take a closer look, very close, to the hidden dimensions of institutionalized counselling and see the ambiguity that appears there. Siarkiewicz guides us through the various nooks and crannies. We see the ways of exercising disciplinary powers, we observe the importance of space in the process of counselling, and we meet the creators of the aid institution text and its recipients. It is in this chapter that there is an in-depth, extremely insightful and passionate analysis of counsellors' different concepts of time, the strategy of 'playing time' and 'time dialogue' in relationships between counsellors and counselees.

The fourth chapter is one of my favourites. I was fascinated by the idea of 'counselling provoked by circumstances', reversing the established order of the roles that we are accustomed to. This is a counselling is a kind of coming to the man himself. Using the etnometodological 'break' intervention has brought amazing results. How much you can learn about consulting using intervention, such a simple yet brilliant in its simplicity method, let the reader check this in the book. I do not want to deprive him/her of this pleasure and also wish to encourage people to read the book; I will leave the reader in suspense.

In chapter five, we meet counselling that is embedded in everyday life. We have the opportunity to see, for example, what kinds of counselling are 'on the threshold', 'in the meantime', or 'incidental'.

The sixth and final chapter contains reflections on the evaluation of the counselling effectiveness. Taking into account the uncertainties appearing here and the problems with the unequivocal determination of the nature of this effectiveness and measuring it at all, the author introduces a very interesting distinction between real and symbolic effective counselling. In this context, there are very inspiring reflections on the role of the body on the contemporary labour market and the counselling effectiveness in the creation of an adequate body (or perhaps only its illusion?).

The book reads very well, let yourself be seduced by the author, and with confidence follow her on the quest to the 'veiled' and through its meaning sometimes to the 'dangerous' worlds of counselling. This trip is very instructive, moves the imagination, makes one curious and inspires. For readers who are reflective and like to explore the deeper dimensions of these counselling worlds, this book is essential reading.

*Michał Mielczarek*

(Translated from Polish by Michał Mielczarek)

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