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SOCIAL INEQUALITIES – THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS FROM AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Contemporary considerations on social inequalities are more and more often of an interdisciplinary character. Particular interest in the above-mentioned issues becomes noticeable in sociological and economic sciences and is also gradually increasing in geographical disciplines. The aim of this study is to present the problem of social inequalities from an interdisciplinary perspective. The analysis highlights the contribution of research conducted by representatives of sociology, economics, and geography. The methods of classification and identification of factors shaping social inequalities were also discussed.

Key words

social inequalities, exclusion, poverty.

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1. Introduction

Social inequalities in the 21st century belong to global problems, both in the socio-economic and political dimensions. Inequalities are most often manifested in the fact that some individuals cannot fully use the privileges available to others or that they are treated differently (worse) only because they belong to a certain social group or category (Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz, 2011). Inequalities are commonly associated with poorer countries identified as developing areas. However, the problem affects every part of the world, and it is just its spatial scale that differs. Researchers of social inequalities emphasise an extremely important role of factors influencing their

emergence. Many of them point to the so-called inheritance of inequalities or their transmission from generation to generation. This fact is often referred to by J. E. Stiglitz, a Nobel Prize winner in economics. He writes,

It would seem that there is more justice in the United States and Europe, but this is only an appearance. Those who graduate from the best universities with the highest scores are more likely to get a good job. But the system is unfair, because these are rich parents who send their children to the best kindergartens, the best primary and secondary schools, and their graduates then have a much greater chance of getting into elite universities (Stiglitz, 2015, p. 43).

For those born in poverty, it is very difficult to get out of their position. Numerous representatives of the social sciences prove that traditional social stratification variables, such as social class, education, or employment status, are still important predictors of the emergence of social inequalities (DiPrete, McManaus, 2000; Fouarge, Layte, 2005; Whelan, Maitre, 2008; Vandecasteele, 2015).

Currently, the problem of social inequalities is studied by representatives of many scientific disciplines. They are widely discussed, among others, by sociologists who interpret them differently. According to G. Lissowski et al. (2011) and Z. Sawiński (2012), we always talk about inequalities when socially desirable values or socially valued resources are unequally distributed among the members of a given community. Within the economic sciences, we find a number of definitions of social inequalities indicating unequal access to socially valued goods. They emphasise the impact of a differentiated income distribution as the basic element shaping the emergence of inequalities. There are many dimensions in the context of which social inequalities can be studied, including income, property, access to healthcare, knowledge, and gender. Social inequalities are noticeable in every area of social life and have an impact on the material and non-material human existence (Krot, Lewicka, 2016). To a large extent, they result from unequal life chances and the possibility of using the social economic goods of individuals and social groups. In geographical terms, it can be assumed that social inequalities are all limitations resulting from unequal access to socially valued goods and resources, with an emphasis on the impact of the spatial factor on the emergence of disproportions (Kiniorska, 2020).

2. Research areas concerning social inequalities

There exists a large amount of literature related to social inequalities, both domestic and foreign. In theoretical considerations, first of all, the emphasis is put on identifying the factors that cause them to emerge, while constructing a number of theories and models of the formation of inequalities. However, as J. Czerny notes, there is no indication of the sources of inequality, the so-called primary causes. The author rightly points to the importance of axiological contrasts in the emergence of a number of cases of social turmoil, as in:

It is not a social problem that the dog of a rich man eats better than many people. But the social problem is that

many people have nothing to eat at all. This is an example of axiological contrast. If a footballer from a reputable team earns as much a month as 30 university professors, then such a phenomenon is considered an example of an axiological contrast. If an actress of a television series earns as much as eight university professors, this is another example of an axiological contrast (Czerny, 2014, p. 19).

The phenomena of axiological contrast are intensifying in the contemporary world, because civilisation creates particularly favourable conditions for situations in which it is not reliable work but economic anarchy called market liberalisation that makes a model outstrip several professors with her high yields. Naturally, this is a philosophical approach, but it indicates the need for further research in scientific discussions and for putting a theoretical order into the issues of social inequalities and their interpretation in the scope of the construction of theories and models.

In the research on social inequalities, a lot of space is devoted to identification of factors influencing formation of social inequalities (Kiniorska, 2020). Sociologists often focus on the role of education. Hence, an important research area in sociological research is the issue of the relationship between access to education and social stratification (Table 1). In the economic and geographical perspective, significant importance is also attached to factors resulting from human capital. Geographical studies also emphasise the impact of social marginalisation and poverty on shaping social inequalities.

The problems raised in the discussion on social inequalities can be divided into several thematic groups. The first one concerns inequalities resulting from personal characteristics and inherited social capital and is composed of studies conducted mainly by representatives of sociology and psychology (Table 2). In the sociological literature, the main emphasis is on examining the differences between social groups with different levels of privilege. Almost everywhere in the world, social position primarily depends on economic resources, politics and the way the country is managed. Also, the population's education, occupation, ethnic and religious group, age, disability may be the factors causing inequalities to emerge or deepening the already existing ones (Pantyley, 2018). For geographers as well as for economists, an interesting research field is the one concerning the influence of geographic location (spatial factor) on the formation of inequalities. W. Pantyley (2018), who focused her research on health inequalities, mentions in her considerations that the concept of place and space is of fundamental importance to the issue. The author emphasises that the concept of space comes down to the measurements

Tab. 1. The role of factors in shaping social inequalities from an interdisciplinary perspective

Discipline	Research area	Authors
Economics	Impact of inequalities on economic growth through human capital	Atkinson, 2015; Bartak, 2015; Bell, Freeman, 2001; Fishman, Simhon, 2002; Foellmi, Zweimüller, 2003; Galor, Zeira, 1993; Galor, 2011; Halter et al., 2014; Piketty, Wilkinson, 2009; Piketty, 2015.
Sociology	Education vs. social stratification	Breen, Goldthorpe, 1997; Breen, Jonsson, 2005; Coleman, 1986; Coleman, Fararo, 1992; Domański, 2004; Goldthorpe, 2012; Mare, 1981, 1991; Marshall, 1988; Suchocka, 2010; Therborn, 2015.
Geography	Marginalisation and poverty	Bartnicka, 1991; Czerny, 2012; Kamińska, 2011; Lisowski, 2000; Marcińczak, 2009; Rembowska, 1990; Rykiel, 2000; Węclawowicz, 2002; Wójcik, Tomczyk, 2015.

Source: own work.

Tab. 2. Selected research areas of social inequalities in an interdisciplinary approach

Research area	Discipline
inequalities resulting from personal characteristics and family-conditioned inherited social capital	sociology, psychology
inequalities resulting from the degree of peripherality and gradation between the centre and periphery	geography, economics
inequalities among subregions within regions	sociology, psychology, geography
inequalities resulting from the weaknesses and negative qualities of social capital	sociology, psychology, geography
educational inequalities	sociology, economics, geography, psychology

Source: own work based on Popławski, 2009.

of distance and proximity as well as of the spatial distribution of both protective and risk factors in shaping the health condition. On the other hand, the concept of place concerns administrative divisions within the country, as well as belonging to a specific place of residence.

Contemporary research on social inequalities covers many thematic groups. The research on the cumulative effects of social inequalities in urban and rural areas is among the constantly developing ones. The assessment concerns, *inter alia*, the impact of the social welfare reforms and the economic crisis of 2008 on the processes of changes in the policies of particular governments (Gkartzios, 2013; Murphy, Scott, 2013; Zavras et al., 2012; Zografakis, Karanikolas, 2012). Society, especially young people around the world, is facing far-reaching economic, political, and social changes and „are often blocked in the labour market” (Black et al., 2019, p. 264). The literature on the subject indicates that the cumulative effect of these changes in urban and rural areas leads to an increase in social inequalities and polarisation in some socio-economic groups (Asenova et al., 2015). Scientific research carried out in various research centres in Europe covers, among others, the assessment of the impact of austerity policy on shaping

the life path of young people in rural areas, as, for example, the research conducted by the British centre (Black et al., 2019; Shucksmith, 2004; Sturzaker, Shucksmith, 2011). There is a lot of interest among researchers in the mechanisms through which social inequalities are passed from generation to generation as well as in references to P. Bourdieu's theory (1977, 1987). The influence of social origin on the classic dimensions of social inequalities is widely discussed. Quantitative and qualitative analyses are conducted through assessment of the quality of life. Numerous studies show a positive correlation between life satisfaction and education (e.g. Hadjar et al., 2008; Yang, 2008), employment opportunities (Di Tella et al., 2010; Winkelmann, & Winkelmann, 1998), income (Wolbring et al., 2013) and health (Deaton, 2008; Gwozdz, Sousa-Poza, 2010). The role of place as an important factor shaping „social relations” is also emphasised (Savage, 2010; Sherman, 2009, 2013). In addition to the above-mentioned, the research includes an assessment of people's attitudes towards social inequalities. They are discussed both in theoretical (Alesina et al., 2012; Bénabou, Tirole, 2006) and empirical (Bavetta et al., 2017; Kuhn, 2011, 2019; Schneider, 2012) aspects. As a consequence, growing social inequalities may lead to antisocial

behaviour, as indicated by numerous researchers, including L. Gangadharan et al. (2019). The authors emphasise that social behaviour can negatively impact society, continually threatening social security and cohesion, and discouraging investment and business activities. Therefore, it is very important to study the sources, goals, intensity, and patterns of antisocial behaviour (Gangadharan et al., 2019).

3. Inequalities and related terms

A number of related terms are associated with the concept of social inequalities, often mistaken as synonyms. However, these are most often phenomena that accompany or result from social inequalities. Poverty and social exclusion are manifestations of social inequalities. In the literature on the subject, we can find various definitions of poverty. Initially, definitions of poverty focused only on basic needs. The poverty zone was identified mainly due to the income situation (or based on expenditure) of households. Later, the multidimensionality of poverty gained an increasing number of supporters (Sen, 1997; Mikuła, 2016). Nevertheless, as pointed out by T. Panek and J. Zwierzchowski (2013), in the practice of poverty measurement, the so-called economic definition of the phenomenon is most often adopted. Poverty is defined as a situation in which an individual (person, family, household) does not

have sufficient funds (both in the form of income from previous periods and in the form of accumulated material resources) to meet their needs. The cultural, political and sociological aspects of living in poverty, related to exclusion from social life, remain beyond the definition of poverty. In the European social policy, a more preferred category is social exclusion, which is multidimensional and is defined in terms of the inability to participate in important aspects of social, economic, political and cultural life of a given society (Kiniorska 2020). When pointing to the differences between the terms used, a number of elements are taken into account, including the time perspective, the number of dimensions and the reasons for the occurrence of the analysed phenomena (Table 3). In practice, the terms poverty and social exclusion are often used interchangeably. However, the concepts are related but not identical. Exclusion is a much broader concept than poverty, as it draws attention not only to the low level of income, but also to other factors leading to the exclusion of an individual from society (Table 4). The relationship between exclusion and poverty takes the form of a feedback loop (poverty may lead to or result from exclusion) (Panek, 2011).

According to K. Mokrzycka (2013), we can distinguish seven types of social exclusion, which are presented in Table 5 below.

Tab. 3. Elements differentiating the terms: poverty and social exclusion

Terms	Poverty	Social exclusion
Subject of analysis	Individuals, household	Whole society and larger areas
Time perspective	Static	Dynamic processes of degradation and impoverishment
Number of dimensions included	One-dimensionality (monetary dimension)	Multidimensionality
Measurement and type of indicators	Easily measured (monetary indicators)	Difficult to measure, many indicators applied simultaneously, measurement of the process
Reasons	Unmet needs, inequalities in access to resources.	Discrimination in access to integrating institutions.

Source: own work based on Firlit-Fesnak, Szyłko-Skoczny, 2007.

Tab. 4. Differences between social exclusion and poverty

Area of analysis	Social exclusion	Poverty
Discipline	Sociology	Economics
Reason	Discrimination in access to integrating institutions	Unmet needs
Type of social stratification	Level (inside and outside of the group)	Vertical (higher and lower classes)
Suggested remedy	Social services (activating measures)	Social transfers (guaranteed minimum income)

Source: elaborated based on Panek, 2011.

Tab. 5. Selected types of social exclusion

Type	Characteristics
Economic exclusion	Related to poverty, unemployment, homelessness
Exclusion from education and culture	Lack of adequate financial resources limiting access to education and culture, lack of adequate job training and preparation to function in the labour market
Spatial exclusion	Encompasses communities living in isolated areas (slums, blocks of flats), peripheral areas (small towns and rural areas located outside the zone of influence of large urban centres)
Structural exclusion	Related primarily to people with disabilities, ethnic, racial or gender minorities
Digital exclusion	Related to the lack of adequate knowledge in the use of information and communication technologies
Political exclusion	Concerns citizens deprived of means of information and without opportunities to engage in political life
Mental exclusion	Related to difficulties in accessing privileges, professions, or functions due to belonging to a minority, race, or age group (e.g., problems with finding a job for women over 40)

Source: elaborated based on Mokrzycka, 2013.

4. Theories and models of social inequalities

Starting from the late 1970s, researchers in the field of social sciences have shown a growing interest in social theory (Table 6). This theory creates a space where interdisciplinary debates are encouraged, channelled and coordinated, just as over the past century mathematics has become the language through which findings from one branch of natural sciences spread to others (Beck, 2004). Table 6 presents selected theories of social inequalities from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Representatives of sociology make a substantial contribution to shaping the theoretical basis of social inequalities. In explaining the causes of social inequalities, special emphasis is placed on educational inequalities. The classical theories of educational inequalities include: K. Davis and W. Moore's (1945) functional theory of stratification (classification), R. Collins's theory (1975), S. Bowles and H. Gintis's theory (1976) and P. Bourdieu's theory of reproduction (1977). The functional theory of stratification (classification) formulated by American scientists K. Davis and W. Moore was based on an assumption that every society is divided and diversified as to material benefits and social prestige. The basic conclusion of this theory was that positions in society depend on

individuals' qualifications and preparation. Nowadays, the theses of this theory do not sound original, and it has been widely criticised for the statement about promotion saying that the best prepared people occupy the highest positions in society. First of all, scientists emphasised that there are a number of barriers limiting this statement (Collins, 1975; Domański, 2004; Tumin, 1953; Wesółowski, 1966). However, as noted by H. Domański (2004), the functional theory of stratification had a strong influence on research practice, even though the conclusions drawn from it – referring to the positive consequences of social stratification – became the subject of stormy criticism.

In the 1990s, in turn, the question of the reasons for the persistence of inequalities in the context of a systematic increase in the level of enrolment became the focus of researchers' interest. In post-transformation societies, educational inequalities and exclusion are an even greater problem, because along with the transformation, the system of support for education by the state was abolished and left to a neoliberal policy (Borowicz, 2008; Długosz, 2017). The issue of social inequalities is also discussed in the theory of political economy of old age, the age stratification model and the subculture of the ageing theory (Klimczuk, 2011). The first one assumes

Tab. 6. Selected theories of social inequalities from an interdisciplinary perspective

Theories	Disciplines	Authors
Functional theory of stratification, theory of social conflict, theory of reproduction	Sociology	Bourdieu, 1977; Dahrendorf, 1975; Davis, Moore, 1945
Taste-based discrimination theory, human capital theory, information cost theory, theory of job market signalling	Economics	Arrow, 1973; Becker, 1957, 1964; Spence, 1973, 1974; Zellner, 1975
Stages of growth theory, the theory of cumulative causation	Geography	Friedmann, 1974; Myrdal, 1957

Source: own work.

that old age is the result of social policy, division of labour, economic and social differences; therefore, the problems of the elderly should be considered in the context of the world economy, the functions of the state, the labour market and divisions into sex, age, ethnic groups and classes (Halicki, 2006; Synak, 1999; Szatur-Jaworska, 2000). Attention is drawn to discrimination based on age, granting the elderly the status of dependent persons and higher profitability of social programmes for political elites or entrepreneurs than for the elderly. The age stratification model assumes the division of society into age groups that differ in access to goods and social roles, norms, values, and identity (Synak, 1999; Halicki, 2006). This approach emphasises the differentiation of the elderly depending on the time of their birth and ignores the subjective dimension of the individual's perception of age. On the other hand, the subculture of the ageing theory assumes that as a result of exclusion from interaction with other age groups, increased contacts with peers and a sense of community of views and interests, the elderly create communities characterised by separate norms, values and way of living, which can transform into lobby groups and then political parties being in opposition to the dominant culture (Halicki, 2006; Niezabitowski, 2007; Synak, 1999).

In economic theories, identification of factors determining the formation of social inequalities focuses on the labour market. Already in the early 1920s, an English economist F.Y. Edgeworth formulated the first hypothesis of this type which, fifty years later, was developed by B. Bergman. This theory applies to gender inequality and discrimination against national and ethnic minorities. It assumes that salaries depend on the supply of and demand for labour. It explains that a lower level of earnings of women and national and ethnic minorities is a result of an artificial increase in their labour supply, which, in its turn, results in lowering their salaries (Zwiech, 2013).

The processes of social segregation in the labour market constitute the basis for the theory of job market signalling, formulated by A.M. Spence in 1974. It points to the basic factor of inequality in the labour market resulting from employers' beliefs that certain social groups are less productive. This theory lacks explanations as to the determinants of these beliefs about the diversified productivity of particular social groups. It ignores structural and institutional factors. Only the individualistic factor of social discrimination is emphasised.

A. Rosen's model of discrimination, formulated in 1993, is a convergent theory referring to segregation in the labour market. The author assumes that employers discriminate on the basis of visible

characteristics (for example: gender, race, nationality) and do not address job offers to representatives of the discriminated group. By synthesising the basic expressions included in economic theories according to P. Zwiech (2013), we can indicate the following elements:

- in G.S. Becker's taste-based discrimination theory: deliberate wage discrimination related to a taste for discrimination by employers, employees from the dominant group, and clients;
- in the human capital theory: lower resource of human capital of some social groups, differentiation of individual levels of abilities, skills, and qualifications;
- in the theory of job market signalling: employers' beliefs on lower productivity of certain social groups;
- in K. Arrow's information cost theory: costs of information about the suitability of job applicants and fluctuation costs;
- in the hypothesis of limited spatial mobility of women: limitation of women's spatial mobility due to non-economic roles performed by women and self-selection;
- in A. Rosen's discrimination model: bad association of an employee with a workplace due to fewer job offers for people from discriminated groups and a lower level of the minimum wage required by people from these groups.

The above-mentioned theories do not take into account the social context of the undertaken economic activities. They completely ignore cultural aspects as well as institutional and structural factors (trade unions' activities, state intervention and modern organisation of the economy).

Economic theories developed after World War II emphasise the role of human capital (Asteriou, Agiomirgianakis, 2001; Becker, 1964; Mankiw et al., 1992; Shultz, 1975). They indicate that human capital is the basic element and social factor explaining the differences in the level of development or the formation of inequalities between regions (Jones, Manuelli, 1990; Klenow, Rodríguez-Clare, 2004; Lucas, 1988; Mankiw et al., 1992). The second half of the 20th century brought a flourishing of theories emphasising the importance of knowledge, human and social capital, and institutions (Wilkin, 2001). The theory of human capital explains in a simple way where inequalities come from: people who have greater abilities and better conditions for development, i.e. social categories „better equipped“ with capital, will be more willing to learn, because as compensation for the effort they will get greater benefits, while lower abilities, unfavourable environment and perspectives of lower income among members of lower

classes are factors that discourage them from studying longer (Zawistowska, 2012).

In geographical research, an important role in the formation and growth of social inequalities is assigned to the spatial factor. In the description of these phenomena, the polarisation theories, formulated in the light of the concept of interaction between cities and villages and the relationship between the centre and the periphery, become particularly relevant. In the literature on the subject, there is a dichotomous division of theories. In the first case, it is about references to the path of sustainable development. The second group includes theories based on the path of unsustainable development. The theories relating to the path of unsustainable development can be classified into two groups: according to a top-down and bottom-up approach. They refer to different development impulses. The top-down concepts emphasise the importance of the exogenous factor in development. According to the representatives of these concepts, it is assumed that development starts in a few places and spreads to other areas. On the other hand, in the bottom-up concept, it is the endogenous factor which is of fundamental importance. Emphasis is placed on the occurrence of bottom-up initiatives (coming from local communities) (Dyjach, 2013). The top-down theories are represented by the concepts of polarisation, elaborated in the works by F. Perroux (1955), A.O. Hirschman (1958), G. Myrdal (1957) (see: Grzeszczak, 1999; Churski, 2008). The precursor of these theories was a French economist F. Perroux, who in the 1950s used the concept of a growth pole for the first time. He used this term to describe places where economic development is faster than in other areas. In turn, their impact on the neighbourhood is diversified and depends on various factors of a socio-demographic or institutional nature (Stanny, 2013).

The second group of the so-called top-down concepts consists of theories determining the

dependence of the core and the periphery. A commonly cited concept is the centre-periphery theory by R. Prebisch (1959). Its main theses are based on a model composed of two regions: central and peripheral. The author derived his thesis from observation of the varying degree of industrialisation in different parts of the world. As a result, only economic factors were stressed, and in turn, sociological and political factors, among others, were ignored. J. Friedman drew attention to this problem in more detail in his conceptual deliberations, constructing the model of the core and the periphery, which extended A.O. Hirschman's theory of unbalanced growth. J. Friedmann pointed to specific mechanisms strengthening the dominance of the core over the periphery. These are, among others, the transfer of capital, of natural and human resources from the periphery to the core and the resulting faster development, faster modernisation processes or agglomeration benefits occurring in the core (Stanny, Strzelczyk, 2018). The emergence of regional disproportions is conditioned by various factors (Table 7).

At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, particular emphasis in theoretical considerations was placed on the importance of knowledge and creativity for the development of regions. Here, the assumptions of the concept of the learning region by R. Florida (1995) can be indicated as an example. According to the author, learning regions are territorial units indispensable for the development of a knowledge-based economy. Learning regions are the areas that are poles of knowledge, experience and competences, primarily based on human capital. In this theory, the author emphasised the importance of the process of creating and acquiring knowledge, taking place at the level of individuals, companies and institutions through cooperation, with the use of new information and communication technologies. Hence, much attention is currently paid to social inequalities studied in the context of

Tab. 7. Factors deepening regional disproportions

Factors	Description
The domination effect	The weakness of the peripheral regions results from the net transfer of development potential to the centre.
Influence of information	Due to development and innovations, the centre increases its information and technological potential.
Psychological effects	They consist in creating a climate conducive to innovation in the centre and deepening the feeling of inferiority and dependence on the periphery.
Modernisation	There is a growing readiness of the centre to engage in innovations, caused by the accumulation of development trends and profits derived from them.
The "feedback" effect	Innovations in some areas of the economy stimulate their emergence in others.
Increase in productivity	Reduction of innovation costs is achieved through internal and external savings.

Source: Kłysik-Urzeszek, 2010; Dyjach, 2013.

diversified access to knowledge. When talking about inequalities in access to knowledge, we are increasingly referring to digital inequalities. As A. Basińska (2009) writes in the literature on the subject, digital inequalities are often treated as new social inequalities or a new dimension of social inequalities. An interesting way of presenting digital inequalities is shown in J. de Haan's model (2004). Inequalities are created by differences between individuals in terms of such characteristics as age and gender, but also through the context of the possibilities that characterise individuals: level of education, income, work. As J. de Haan (2004) points out, the structural context of opportunities provides an unequal distribution of resources. Unequal distribution of resources causes unequal access to digital technologies, which results in increasing social inequalities. Nowadays, in the age of the information society, the lack of access to means of communication worsens the position of an individual in society and, consequently, may lead to social exclusion (Marczak, 2015). It should be noted that social inequalities have many dimensions, but the elements indicated in the models orient the basic assumptions that may determine the nature of social inequalities. The importance of social capital is also emphasised in theoretical assumptions and model approaches.

The models that define the principles of formation of inequalities largely focus on determinants resulting from socio-cultural contexts. W. Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, E. Rokicka (2008) constructed an analytical model, pointing to the intergenerational transmission of inequalities as a result of the intersecting influences of family, origin, country and local community, as well as individual abilities and activities. In social sciences, a special place is occupied by research on child population and sociological analyses of discrimination against children and adolescents. In Poland, the idea of examining children and childhood was widely promoted by W. Warzywoda-Kruszyńska (2011, 2014, 2015). According to W. Pantley (2018), the sociological approach to childhood

and children resulted in them beginning to be perceived as competent and capable entities, able to influence their environment. The concept of „children's well-being” as a multidimensional research concept has attracted the attention of not only sociologists, but also of representatives of other sciences, including geography, as exemplified by the work of the author of the present study covering the issues of the children's population in theoretical and practical terms. Numerous studies primarily focus on parents' socio-economic status, which essentially affects the living and health conditions of children as well.

The impact of social conditions determines health inequalities that are conditioned by many factors. The socio-economic status, which is the main component of the social position, has a very significant impact on their formation (Table 8). The levels of social determinants, as indicated in the table below, refer to the socio-ecological model of health and G. Dahlgren and M. Whitehead' scheme (Cianciara, 2015). On this basis, health inequalities can be analysed at five levels. The following levels illustrate the factors operating at the level of society (level I), living and working environment (level II), social group (level III) and individuals (IV, V).

Inequalities are the cause of many social problems. Foreign literature more and more often emphasises the importance of the social and environmental factor, which can significantly reduce accumulation of various types of disproportions. Research conducted in Great Britain can serve as an example here. In their analyses, the researchers emphasise that the nature of problems of rural areas is determined by the level of social distribution and environmental resources. Research on social inequalities often combines features describing social phenomena with environmental elements. Among others, A. de Bruin et al. (2009) indicated the following features:

- pollutant emissions and air quality;
- flood hazards;
- landfills;

Tab. 8. Social determinants of health inequalities according to E. Blas, A. Sivasankara Kurup, 2010

Level	Potential determinants
I – Social status (society)	Globalisation, urbanisation, social status, education, social exclusion
II – Exposure (environment)	Social infrastructure, working conditions, social norms
III – Susceptibility (group, subpopulation)	Poverty, unemployment, low education, limited access to health care, addictions
IV, V – Health effects	Poor quality of health services, discrimination
	Health diversification, educational consequences related to employment and income, social exclusion, stigma

Source: elaborated based on Blas, Sivasankara Kurup, 2010.

- education level;
- employment structure;
- social capital;
- place of migrants' origin.

Authors indicate that political programmes commonly focus on issues of social and environmental inequalities, which are often analysed jointly in foreign literature. However, there is a lack of comparative and interdisciplinary studies. The results of social and environmental inequalities began to be increasingly noticeable in rural areas (Elgar, Aitken, 2011; Pickett, Wilkinson, 2009; Wilkinson, Marmot, 2003; Wilkinson, Pickett, 2009). In the groups of factors describing inequalities, the importance of conditions detailing the accessibility to various levels of education, as well as environmental barriers and the level of social capital are stressed.

Nowadays, the level of education and the human capital, which is closely related to it and consists of knowledge and skills acquired in the education process, are perceived as key factors of development, but also of the emergence of social inequalities. They explain the causes of uneven development of territorial systems much better than the classical economic factors used previously (Czapiewski, Janc, 2012). Rural residents have limited access to education. This is related to the financial situation of households and educational aspirations, as well as to the conditions of functioning of the educational system. The first visible barrier in this respect is the hindered educational advancement due to limited access to

pre-school education institutions. The skills that young children learn from kindergarten pay off at school with better learning outcomes, and at a later stage – better functioning in social and professional life. The view that rural residents have worse education opportunities has long been dominant, which, given the low level of education of the rural population, is one of the most important barriers to building a knowledge-based farming and introducing non-agricultural functions to the Polish countryside (Flaga, Wesołowska, 2002, 2015; Matysiak-Błaszczuk, Słupska, 2013; Rydz, 2002; Wawrzyniak, 2001). J. Wilkin (2001) divides the barriers to access to education into economic, spatial-locational, and environmental-cultural ones. In particular, he draws attention to worse conditions and an average lower level of education in rural schools. Another factor that determines the poorer development opportunities of rural areas is their location and distance from cities, which is also a manifestation of limited access to sources of knowledge. This is confirmed, inter alia, by worse results in examinations at particular levels of education (Table 9).

Digital exclusion is a new social problem, also conditioned by difficult access to education. Its causes may result from living in poor and peripheral regions. The extremely fast development of technology often requires the users of modern media to constantly adapt to changes. Once acquired skills and knowledge become obsolete very quickly. Many other issues have an impact on the emergence

Tab. 9. Average exam results of students of last years of lower secondary and primary schools due to the location of the school

Exam	Subject	Countryside	City with less than 20 thousand inhabitants	City with 20 to 100 thousand of inhabitants	City with more than 100 thousand inhabitants
Exam after the 6 th grade of primary school year 2016	Polish language	69	69	71	74
	Maths	51	50	54	60
	English language	66	69	73	78
Exam after the 3 rd grade of lower secondary school year 2019	history and knowledge about society	57	59	63	63
	Polish language	62	61	63	67
	Sciences	47	47	49	54
	Maths	40	40	43	49
	English language basic level	62	64	70	77
Exam after the 8 th grade of the primary school year 2019	English language extended level	48	50	51	58
	Polish language	62	60	63	67
	Maths	42	42	45	52
	English language	52	56	61	69

Source: elaborated based on Czyżewski, Kryszak, 2021.

of social inequalities in rural areas, such as the position of women and the importance of the traditional family model in shaping social attitudes. It is also possible to associate demographic phenomena with social processes, especially their unfavourable aspects resulting from the increasing ageing of the society and depopulation. These processes, however, do not proceed at the same pace throughout Poland and, as a result, the demographic structure of the rural population is spatially diversified. Eastern Poland is a special case of an area characterised by ageing society. This phenomenon has been observed there for a long time. The process varies in intensity in the studied area and is also prone to multi-faceted fluctuations. According to forecasts, this problem will gradually worsen as the areas of Poland, previously considered to be demographically younger, are ageing rapidly. The process of double ageing of the population is also visible, when, along with the increase in the percentage of elderly people, the structure of this sub-population changes, consisting in an even faster increase in the number of very old people, i.e. at least 80-year-olds. Availability of health care facilities and the quality of services provided are a measure strongly emphasising the differences in rural development. The problems of inequalities in access to health care resulting from the place of residence in the urban-rural system are confirmed by scientific studies (Casey et al., 2001; Michalski, 2002; Bennett et al., 2012). Rural residents are less likely to visit doctors regularly (Arcury et al., 2005), including preventive examinations (Valet et al., 2009), and usually have less access to emergency services (Watts et al., 1999, Fan et al., 2011) which are more often located in urban areas (Ucieklak-Jeż, Bem, 2017). Numerous measurements carried out for rural areas in Poland indicate differentiated access to health care in rural areas. The researchers point out that, regardless of regional diversity, it is of particular concern that most regions have not implemented effective health policies which would lead to improved access to services for rural residents. The consequence of this phenomenon is a lower level of health and a greater incidence of diseases. A measurable example of this are deaths and their structure in rural areas being the consequence of limited access to healthcare. This is a worrying situation that proves that problems in access to health care do exist (Michalski, Pierkhacz 2001, Michalski 2010). Another important factor influencing the unequal access to health services is lower mobility of the rural population resulting from many elements, such as health, the condition of the road network or the lack of public transport. The large dispersion of medical infrastructure also plays its role (Ucieklak-Jeż, Bem 2017). All

the above-mentioned factors affect particular social groups with varying intensity, which is one of the main causes of social inequalities in health (Marek et al., 2011).

Panel studies, conducted by J. Czapiński and T. Panek as part of *Social Diagnosis until the year 2015*, indicated three groups of factors responsible for the formation of inequalities, namely: structural exclusion (living in the countryside, one's education lower than of secondary level, father's education of primary level or lower, and poverty), physical exclusion (age 50+, disability) and normative exclusion (loneliness, addiction, conflict with the law, being discriminated). It may be concluded that this phenomenon is conditioned by many factors. A common feature of numerous considerations is that they indicate rural areas in Poland as particularly vulnerable to the emergence of social inequalities. Nowadays, as a result of increasing polarisation processes, rural areas are characterised by different trends of change. To a large extent, they depend on the location of the village, but naturally also on the historical factor and the contemporary socio-economic changes that have taken place in these areas. Another element is the attitude of the residents themselves. It became apparent, among others, in the research by W. Kałamucka (2017) conducted in the light of the concept of securing existence in selected rural areas of the Lublin voivodeship. These areas often experience the consequences of economic and ownership transformations. The author conducted varied quantitative and qualitative research based on official statistics and interviews with residents. She pointed out that these are the areas most exposed to poverty and social exclusion and, consequently, to consolidation of inequalities, where development processes take place very slowly. As W. Kałamucka (2017) writes, unemployment and depopulation are the main problems. The research shows that better located and connected municipalities and towns gain the most from development processes. As a result of all these phenomena, the distance between particular villages is increasing. In addition, the belief, confirmed by decades of experience, that development depends on actions of the state or municipal authorities does not favour any activity of the inhabitants.

5. Conclusion

Social inequalities are the subject of extensive analyses for various fields of science. Nowadays, research is primarily focused on the assessment of relations, both interpersonal and among individual social groups. Hence, there is a growing interest in the issue

of social inequalities which result, *inter alia*, from the deepening gap between wealthy and poorer parts of society. They are also conditioned by the concentration of poverty and other negative phenomena in certain regions. Social inequalities can affect many aspects of life, from income to access to information, the ability to profit from cultural goods and to develop one's own talents. Therefore, they should be analysed in many aspects, indicating the barrier to participation in the full mainstream of social life. Considerations on social inequalities should be preceded by a reflection on the personal characteristics of an individual and his/her position in social life. As numerous studies conducted by representatives of sociology have shown, personal characteristics play a key role in the process of forming social inequalities. The specificity of the analysed area is also significant, as social polarisation is created in the context of two basic elements: the historical factor and the location. Thus, social inequalities have various grounds and affect, to a greater or lesser extent, *inter alia*, the course of demographic phenomena or the availability of resources, at the same time determining the life chances of entire social groups that occupy a specific place in space. Despite socio-economic development, peripherality does not disappear, and what is more, among the units (regions) qualified as peripheral, one can distinguish certain groups of territorial units, the so-called „outliers”, with extremely high indicators in various dimensions of the peripherality.

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