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The Attitude of Young Adults to Others in Culturally Diverse Environments

Abstract:

The subject matter discussed in the article comprises the issues related to social relations, in particular with making life choices by young adults: the decisions related to the choice of friends, the choice of a life partner or a consent to the marriage of the child with a person of a different religion or nationality. The research with the use of the survey method was conducted among students from the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, living in culturally diverse areas. The surveyed students show an open attitude towards Others in terms of religion. The results of the study confirmed the earlier tendency to choose close acquaintances and friends, regardless of their religious denomination. Students are a little less willing to choose a life partner and are aware of the difficulties encountered by mixed marriages.

Keywords:

religiousness, sense of identity, social identification, university students, Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the second decade of the 21st century, cultural differentiation is already a fact. It is difficult to find a culturally homogeneous country in Europe. Until a few decades ago, cultural diversity was particularly characteristic of borderlands understood in the territorial dimension.

Among the characteristics of culturally diverse areas are: multilingualism (bilingualism, multilingualism); the interpenetration of various cultural and civilisational influences (linguistic, economic, political); diverse attitudes to life and social values, high tolerance, open attitudes towards people of other nationalities, religions or, often, awareness of this diversity.

According to Andrzej Sadowski (2011a, pp. 48–73), cultural diversity is the starting point for the transformation, through democratic transformations, of a culturally diverse society into a pluralistic society, and then into a multicultural society. “We are dealing with the phenomenon of multiculturalism only when: 1. there are permanent, multifaceted, and voluntary forms of intercultural contact, which result in the formation of a qualitatively new, culturally diverse cultural, and social whole; 2. we are dealing with the end of cultural domination over others, the end of the superior position of the collective, whose culture, by virtue of its organisation into a state, has acquired the status of the dominant culture; 3. the survival, development or regression of culture(s) in the basic dimension is decided by the sympathisers themselves, the supporters of a given culture; 4. cultures become detached from politics, violence, and their political and legal regulations, and, to a fundamental extent, the sphere of culture becomes regulated by cultural norms; 5. advanced processes of cultural integration make society, despite the changing, dynamic cultural diversity, a whole integrated enough to achieve the intended goals together” (Sadowski, 2011b, pp. 19–20).

2. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

In the countries of Central Europe, we can now speak of culturally diverse societies with elements of a pluralistic society and harbingers of changes towards multicultural societies. These elements and harbingers of change are most easily found in areas that have been culturally diverse for decades, especially in areas inhabited by national, ethnic, or religious minorities.

Living in a multicultural environment creates the opportunity for everyday, direct contact with others. From the earliest years of life, the inhabitants function in at least two cultural circles and are subject to extended socialisation influences, which is associated with an increased number of significant others, and not only from their own cultural circles. The attitude towards Others is formed in the process of family, school, and local socialisation.

It can be assumed that the social conditions of interaction in multicultural communities are particularly important in shaping the attitude of young people towards the Others – those who are different in terms of nationality and religion. In the process of socialisation, young people assimilate the system of values present in the culture of the family, school, religious, national, and territorial group. Living in a multicultural environment multiplies the number of stimuli affecting children and adolescents. The opening up of the world, especially Europe, gives and creates new models for the functioning of various groups, and young people can confidently formulate their own life plans.

Young people and adults, especially students, are the fastest to react to the changes taking place in the political and social sphere, and they are called the barometer of change. Early adulthood is between 20 and 30/35 years of age. For students, it is a time not only to gain education and professional qualifications, but also to prepare for taking up and fulfilling the obligations assigned to this stage of life. Robert J. Havighurst (1956) enumerates among the developmental tasks of early adulthood: choosing a life partner, learning to live with a partner, starting in family roles, taking care of children, managing the home, starting a professional career, taking on professional responsibility, and finding the right social group. The three main tasks for this stage of life are to perform – and nowadays increasingly often prepare for – the role of an employee, partner/spouse, and parent.

Having ideas about one's own individual characteristics, but also about one's national or religious group, is necessary for a person to shape individual and social identity. Awareness of these features also serves to build the sense of separateness of members of one's group from other groups, which is particularly important in the situation of people belonging to a national or religious minority. Identification with the group, related to defining oneself in terms of group membership, is an important element of the relationship with others. To explain the mechanisms of formation and functioning of groups, I adopted Henri Tajfel's (1972) theory of social identification. People for whom group membership is important try to distinguish their group from the other group in various dimensions. There is a tendency to exaggerate differences and also to favour one's own group. And it

is these similarities and differences that can be decisive in the selection of close acquaintances and friends.

The research aim was to learn about behaviour in the cultural sphere at the individual level. The main research problem is: How do people cope with cultural diversity, and in particular with making life choices, decisions related to the choice of a spouse, with the choice of a life partner or consent to the marriage of a child with a person of a different religion or nationality?

Three countries located in Central Europe, including multicultural and multi-religious regions, were selected for the comparative study.

The study was conducted among students from the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia living in culturally diverse areas. The research is a part of a team research project “In the circle of Polish culture in Poland and abroad” (carried out together with Ewa Ogrodzka-Mazur), the aim of which was to conduct a comparative analysis of the results of research conducted on the borderlands inhabited by national minorities in Poland in the countries neighbouring Poland.

The research was conducted among 450 students from the humanities and social sciences, but 440 questionnaires were qualified for further analysis (including 86 in the Czech Republic, 194 in Poland, and 160 in Slovakia).

The surveyed students were asked projective questions, i.e., they referred to an imaginary situation of contact with a representative of a minority group – religious or national. These questions referred not only to the cognitive schemes of the respondents, but also to their emotions. Using the classic Emory Bogardus scale, the studies limited the spheres of contact in the private sphere (indicator: close acquaintance/friend) and in the intimate sphere (indicator: inclusion of a person of a different nationality or a person of a different religion/denomination in the family through marriage).

3. STUDENTS’ ATTITUDES TOWARDS OTHER PEOPLE – RESEARCH RESULTS

Learning about interpersonal relations in the social sciences includes studying the sphere of beliefs and attitudes towards Others. In these considerations, the focus is on those related to religion and are a manifestation of religious tolerance. In practice, it will be granting oneself the right to contact people of different religions or other nationalities. Although religions are universal, in the past, they were ethnicised and adapted to the needs of the culture of a given nation. “Formal varieties of the same religions within different national cultures are not identical” (Kłoskowska, 1996, p. 39).

The first issue discussed is the preferences associated with the choice of friend(s).

Table 1. *Preferences related to the choice of a friend (data is given in percentage)*

Categories		Czech Republic	Poland	Slovakia
A person of a different faith could be a friend	Yes, religion does not matter here	92,50	95,30	93,50
	No, I would rather have friends of the same faith	7,50	4,70	6,50

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Only a few of the surveyed students declare their desire to have close acquaintances and friends of the same religion. The socialisation of these young people took place in culturally diverse environments, so it is understandable, and even natural, that most of the surveyed students have close acquaintances and friends of people of other religions in their circle of acquaintances, friends.

Table 2. *Having friends of the Catholic/Evangelical faith (data is given as a percentage)*

Categories		Czech Republic	Poland	Slovakia
Of the Catholic faith	Yes	87,50	85,50	95,90
	No	12,50	14,50	4,10
Of the Evangelical denomination	Yes	62,30	78,70	80,60
	No	37,70	21,30	19,40

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The surveyed students are open in their contact with representatives of other religions. They are not only acquaintances, but often gain the status of a close acquaintance or even a friend. Less often, these friends are people of the Evangelical faith, but this is probably due to the smaller number of people of this denomination living in a given region.

Greater distance appears in the answers to the question about the intimate sphere (one's own wedding or the wedding of a family member with a representative of another group).

Table 3. *Choosing a person of a different religion as a life partner (data is given as a percentage)*

Categories	Czech Republic	Poland	Slovakia
Yes, religion does not matter here	57,30	43,60	51,90
No, but I would like to have a partner of the same faith	42,70	56,40	48,10

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

The majority of respondents, regardless of their country of residence, declare acquaintance with people of other faiths, but many fewer people would like to form a close relationship with them. More than half of Polish students have a life partner and a person of the same religion. More detailed declarations related to the selection of a loved one for the life of the person in Table 4.

Table 4. *Preferences related to the choice of life partner (data is given as a percentage)*

Categories	Czech Republic	Poland	Slovakia
Of the same nationality	29,40	40,00	34,30
Regardless of national origin, as long as it is of the same religion	9,40	11,40	18,50
National origin and religion do not matter when choosing a husband/wife	11,80	36,20	47,20
It is hard to say	49,40	12,40	0

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

Slovak students have the most open attitudes about choosing a life partner for themselves, but they prefer it to be a person of the same nationality. Similar declarations were made by Polish students. Czech students have the most doubts in this regard. They wrote that character traits, education, and interests were important.

Table 5. Declaration of consent for the marriage of a child with a person of a different nationality and with a person of a different religion/denomination (data is given in percentage)

Categories		Czech Republic		Poland		Slovakia	
With a person of a different religion/ denomination	Definitely yes	18,80	55,20	14,40	67,30	19,60	55,30
	Rather yes	36,50		52,90		35,70	
	No	11,80	14,20	9,60	11,50	17,00	19,70
	Definitely not	2,40		1,90		2,70	
	It depends		30,60		21,20		25,00
With a person of a different nationality	Definitely yes	26,50	73,50	25,70	91,00	22,30	68,70
	Rather yes	47,00		65,30		46,40	
	No	3,60	3,60	2,00	4,00	6,30	8,10
	Definitely not	0		2,00		1,80	
	It depends		22,90		5,00		23,20

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The surveyed students are more likely to accept their child's relationship with a person of a different nationality or religion than to make such a choice themselves. They are aware of the not always good treatment of such relationships in their social environment.

Table 6. Perception of mixed-nationality marriages in the environment (data given as a percentage)

Categories	Czech Republic	Poland	Slovakia
Very good	17,90	12,60	15,20
Good	46,40	55,20	33,90
Average	32,10	26,40	42,90
Bad	3,60	5,70	6,30
Very bad	0	0	1,80

Source: Author's own elaboration.

In response to the question about the perception of mixed marriages in their environment, students most often mentioned difficulties with communication, as well as with social isolation they may experience from natives. Marriage is a social relationship, so it involves contact in the broader family and in the neighbourhood. And although the respondents themselves allow their child to have a relationship

with a person of a different nationality, they indicated the lack of acceptance from the family as a difficulty. The students also pointed to intolerance and problems with finding a job.

Table 7. Difficulties encountered by mixed marriages (data are given as a percentage)

Categories	Czech Republic	Poland	Slovakia
Intolerance of natives	29,63	29,52	38,39
Problems with assimilation in the place of residence/ social isolation	45,68	47,62	35,71
Difficulty finding a job	32,10	19,05	26,79
Problems in linguistic communication	55,56	52,38	50,89
Lack of acceptance of the spouse(s)	35,80	41,90	43,75
Other	3,70	2,86	7,14

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The analysis of the results of the research allows us to see differences in the declarations of the surveyed students related to making life choices, decisions related to the choice of a spouse, the choice of a life partner or consent to the marriage of a child with a person of a different religion or nationality.

4. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The changes that took place in religiosity in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia after the political transformation were related to the religious revival (especially in the Czech Republic at the beginning of the 1990s) and religious pluralism (which was reflected in the “massive” registration of new churches and religious associations). To a large extent, this has led to a diversification of the religious structure of societies that are no longer as uniform in this respect as they were a few decades ago. As Peter L. Berger notes, “for most of history, humanity has lived in communities characterised by a high degree of coherence of values and beliefs. Modernity undermines this cohesion: through migration and urbanisation, as a result of which people of different beliefs have to constantly clash; through universal education and mass reading, opening up horizons of knowledge unknown to most pre-modern

people; and, perhaps most dramatically, by mass communication” (Berger, 2005, pp. 5–6). At the level of individual consciousness, this means that “religion is no longer something transparent, but becomes, like an increasing part of the tradition that shapes us, an object of reflection and decision” (Berger, 2005, pp. 5-6). Religious pluralism at the institutional and individual levels means that modern man functions in competitive conditions and should be able to cope with the situation of making choices, including the choice of acquaintances, friends and, finally, a life partner.

The presented results allow us to see the high level of openness of the young adults in building relationships with the Others in terms of religion and nationality. Similar results were obtained in a study conducted among secondary school students in the Czech and Polish Cieszyn Silesia. Panel research revealed dynamics in contacts with representatives of other faiths. In 1998, 13,6% of the respondents did not have such contact (Grabowska, 1998, p. 56), in 2015, this percentage decreased to 4% (Grabowska, 2016, p. 43). Such a widespread openness declared by the surveyed youth allows to explain the cultural diversity on the Polish-Czech borderland, especially the religious diversity, which gives the possibility of direct contact with representatives of various religions and, at the same time, creates an opportunity to shape tolerant attitudes.

The results of nationwide surveys also indicate a growing openness of Poles towards followers of other religions (Roguska, 2012). It builds close relations between people of different faiths and facilitates professing the same Christian religion, especially since the socialisation of the respondents, including those who do not believe in God, took place in a culture saturated with Christian content.

Milton Gordon (1964, p. 80), in his theory of structural assimilation, pointed to a direct relationship between the integration of societies and the conclusion of mixed marriages (including heterogeneous marriages). We can say about the societies of Central European countries that they are not only diverse, but also integrated. And mixed marriages are still considered a manifestation of “integration and social cohesion” (Brzozowska, 2017, p. 1).

To a large extent, the surveyed students are in favour of marriages of different religions. The theory of complementary needs can be applied to the development of these opinions (Winch, 1967). According to Robert Winch, it is socio-demographic characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, religion, income, level of education, age, socioeconomic status, occupation groups, and the place of residence of potential partners that make up the so-called persons with the same or similar social biography. In communities where minority groups are not separated, intergroup contact occurs frequently, which may be reflected in marriages of mixed nationalities and heterogeneous religions.

Cultural factors play an increasingly important role in marital selection. Matthijs Kalmijn (1991) distinguished the factors of marital choice at the level of 1. microsocial, 2. mesosocial, and 3. macrosocial. The first group is the preference for the characteristics of the future partner. The second group consists of elements related to belonging to a social group and the strength of the group's influence on the marital choices of its members. Therefore, ethnic and racial affiliation are important, and in the case of the discussed research results – national and religious affiliation. The third group is structural constraints related to the availability of husband and wife candidates. Kalmijn (1991), analysing the results of research conducted in the years 1955–1989 in the USA, first noticed a tendency to increase the number of marriages with different religions (within the Christian religion), so that in the following decades, education replaced religion as a factor in choosing a spouse.

The tendency to enter into mixed marriages is confirmed by the results of a study by Peter M. Blau, Carolyn Becker, Kevin M. Fitzpatrick (1984), and Matthijs Kalmijn and Pascale I. van Zantvliet (2013). Kalmijn and van Zantvliet confirm that having an ethnically diverse friendship network has a positive effect on the likelihood of entering into an interethnic relationship. In Poland, similar tendencies were noted by Alicja Hruzd-Matuszczyk (2011), Ewa A. Sowa-Behtane (2019), Joanna Cukras-Stelągowska (2022), and others.

Among the difficulties encountered by mixed marriages, the surveyed students (in each country more than half of the respondents) most often mentioned problems in language communication. This factor is pointed out by Anna Odrowąż-Coates (2019) who explains that women acquire language skills faster and more willingly and integrate into the new social environment faster than men.

5. CONCLUSION

In the European cultural circle, the expansion of tolerance is an increasingly noticeable trend. Under conditions of social change, there are changes in our daily lives, “our values, attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and underlying beliefs common among the members of a given community” (Harrison & Huntington, 2003, p. 14). Attitudes towards the Others are formed through socialisation and can be changed and transformed later in life.

This study was intended to replicate, update, and extend previous research on attitudes towards the Others. The study limits the considerations to learning about the preferences related to the choice of close acquaintances, friends and

life partners, with religious denomination and nationality being the main factor in the choice.

From the earliest years of their lives, the surveyed students functioned in multicultural environments. Their socialisation took place in a new political and social reality (after the rejection of communism and after their incorporation into the structures of the European Union).

The results confirm the changes taking place in the Czech, Polish, and Slovak societies. Young people make choices, they are open to contact with others. They have close acquaintances and friends of different faiths, and they are more likely to enter into a mixed ethnic relationship than a heterogeneous religious one. Therefore, it can be pointed out that one of the features of the multicultural society distinguished by Sadowski (2011b) is already rooted in the societies of the countries studied. In order for the other features to exist, intercultural education should be promoted and implemented to a greater extent. Lech Witkowski (2023) put forward the “thesis that concern for intercultural education can strengthen the impact of openness on the difference of young people, despite the habits and pressure of institutions of the adult world, escalating antagonisms” (p. 17).

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