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Cultural Identity of Youth
and Multicultural Education – Empirical Study

Abstract

The main aim of the analysis presented here is to recognise the fact that issues of cultural identity can be solved by reference to a specific model of the cultural identity characteristic for the contemporary young generation. Drawing on research evidence the author highlights the role of multicultural identity. While providing conditions for acquiring cultural, social and personal identity, multicultural identity does not antagonise the processes of individualism and collectivism.

Key words: *cultural identity, borderland and multicultural education*

Introduction

The search for the meaning of cultural identity in the context of European integration remains a valid one, although it means different things for a Frenchman, a German, a Pole or a Russian. In their mentality and lifestyles there are many common features. However, there are, understandably, significant differences, too (cf. Lipski,1994:18).

According to Janusz Gajdy (2003:34), Europeanism as a synonym for the cultural identity of Europe is an amalgam of diverse heritage-encompassing attitudes, lifestyles and ideals moulded historically, which is significant for this continent. It is a specific unity in diversity, which escapes unambiguous definition.

Polish national identity is closely associated with European identity. This is due to: Poland's geographical location in the centre of the continent, the common cultural basis of the whole of Europe, shared Judean-Christian ideas and a similar system of values shared (cf. Tazbir, 1986; Piskozub, 1995; Kłoskowska, 1996). Pol-

ish national identity has been formed under the influence of European models and the common tradition of European philosophy, science, law and culture.

In the process of integration it appears desirable to keep balance between European and national values. There is a need for constant concern about the Polish national heritage and openness to the common European heritage, which has formed Polish national identity for ages.

As a result of the fact that culture shapes aspirations and determines standards of contemporary (mainly young) Poles, research into cultural identity can be of great value for both the theory and practice of social life and education. The major role in shaping identity is played by cultural institutions such as family, school, religious organisations and especially the centres of mass-media information. The shape of young Poles' cultural identity depends largely on their activity.

New generations are initiated into culture in a systematic way through educational and cultural activity realised by educational institutions. In a multicultural environment there is a special need for the formation of cultural sensitivity. It directs educational activity towards developing such values as: the sense of common cultural heritage and local bonds (regional education); acquaintance, understanding and communication between ethnic groups, nations, religions and cultures (multi-cultural education); tolerance, acknowledgement, dialogue, acceptance and mutual cultural borrowing (multicultural education).

Multicultural education as a process of continual dialogue between cultures prevents globalisation and homogenisation on the one hand, and local egocentrism on the other. It provides conditions for the acquisition of cultural, social and individual identity (cf. Nikitorowicz, 1995, 2005).

Theoretical background for the present analysis

The cultural identity of individuals and groups represents a common value of a community and the wealth of common values. It is an object of mutual recognition and respect, not an area of isolation and defence. Therefore, individual development does not constitute an obstacle in the functioning of the individual within a community. On the contrary, the community strengthens individual development, providing for the needs of all its members.

The author is aware of all the diverse theoretical implications that result from the use of the category of identity[1]. For the purpose of the present article the fol-

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[1] A comprehensive review and interpretation of the most important sociological concepts and theories has been made by Bokszański, 1989.

lowing meaning for this term has been accepted: cultural identity is the process of self-determination with respect to some "components" of symbolic reality, the cultural world, which allows an individual to differentiate him/herself from the others, "the close", "the foreign", take a place in the social space, which retains some kind of structure even at times of revolutions.

Assuming that identity, experiencing it and the effort of self-determination is, on the one hand, connected with the process of becoming and choosing one's self, on the other hand, it is entering some kind of cultural order in which an individual exists and which gives her/him a sense of stability and security, I will take identity as an object of analysis in the process of formation in changing conditions of its cultural context.

In the theoretical conceptualisation of the analysis performed the author refers to three following theories of diverse provenance: Kazimierz Obuchowski's theory of needs, Edward Hall's conception of culture and Piotr Sztompka's concept of society formation.

An analysis of the problems and dilemmas that young people face when it comes to the formation of cultural identity requires from the whole reflection to be placed within the philosophical context of "the meaning of life". According to psychologists, there are two stages in man's life when the question about the "meaning of life" has to come forth. The first stage is youth, when the individual has to make weighty choices and determine his/her identity. The other stage is near the end of life, when one feels the need to consider one's life in order to assess its sense and value.

The problem of "the meaning of life" acquires special significance at moments of dramatic transformations. Therefore, the first years following Poland's accession to the European Union is a particularly valuable time for the study of this issue.

Determining the meaning of one's life appears to be the principal need of man. Obuchowski (1983:210) identifies it, as one of the three specifically human direction needs, which include the cognitive needs, the needs for emotional contact and the sense of life. Determining the meaning of one's life has a major place in biographies of individuals. It is a prerequisite for development; it is conducive to self-fulfilment and as such is a contradiction to alienation and life beyond any sense or values.

An individual is not capable of forming her/his identity outside culture or moulding it out of individual experience, which is always marked with the specificity of the experienced situations. Edward Hall (2001) claims that no individual can develop outside culture. Every human being carries a certain paradigm of thought, sensitivity and behaviour, which is acquired throughout a lifetime (notably in early childhood). This mind programming is shaped by the society in which an individual grows up and by the whole of an individual's experience (cf. Hofstede, 2000).

Culture is communication – a human being continually remains in touch with others. As the range of his/her contacts expands, it becomes necessary to expand his/her own culture, which in turn can be done only by revealing the rules according to which it functions.

A general theoretical framework on which to base the analysis of social changes can be the concept of 'becoming a society' or the self-transformation of a social system through historically accumulated social practice. Sztompka (1997) defines the ability of a society to manage such self-transformation as its subjectivity and refers it to the status of social resources or the "subjectivity capital" which remains at a society's disposal. This subjectivity capital consists mainly of two kinds of resources: structural resources and human resources. The third kind of resources is cultural resources. Their character is twofold – both structural and individual.

Social bonds represent an important component of the subjectivity capital. They can be interpreted as a cultural resource, a set of popularised and accepted norms of behaviour, rules defining the required type of social contacts and the desired way of relating to others.

It seems reasonable to define a social bond in its cultural aspect as a moral bond.

The moral bond is a special kind of relationship with others who fall within the category "we". The category "we" is defined by three moral obligations: "we" are those whom we endow with trust, with respect to whom we act loyally, whose affairs concern us by virtue of solidarity. These three elements of a moral bond mark out a specific "moral space", in which each individual seeks his/her place. Identity appears to be an individual reflection of this moral bond, identity as a definition of one's own place in the moral space and marking the borders of moral space within which an individual retains his/her sense of obligation with respect to the rules of trust, loyalty and solidarity. In other words, it identifies "we", where 'we' includes our "I" (cf. Sztompka, 1999).

Considering the fact that identity is formed under the influence of various individual experiences that usually take place in a specific social context and in a series of comparisons between "I" and "the Others". Keeping in mind that with the acquisition of these experiences, in the course of his/her development, an individual forms within him/herself the ability to reflect, which in a diverse social reality that enables her/him to make controlled and purposeful use of new categories. It seems cognitively fruitful to view and interpret these processes in the context of Kazimerz Obuchowski's theory of needs, Edward Hall's concept of culture and Piotr Sztompka's concept of society formation. Thus, it becomes possible to account for the identity behaviour mechanisms of active and creative individuals, who shape their environment according to their own standards.

The sense of young people's cultural identity and research evidence

The formation of cultural identity appears particularly interesting in the areas with special congestion of social processes. Undoubtedly, a borderland is such an area. The problem of identity comes clearly into view in borderland areas, at the meeting point of two worlds and two cultures. It may be an ethnic, professional, class, and ideological or religious borderland. Such contexts often bring about an increased sense of identity, a search for it and often its crisis and disintegration[2].

It becomes apparent that the major problem is to indicate what gives the generation of youth living in borderland conditions a mark of uniqueness and specificity – that is, defining their cultural identity.

I assume that young people living in borderland conditions form their identity backbone in many dimensions. The social-economic and cultural context of the Polish-Czech borderland provides young people with many often contradictory messages and much divergent information, it exerts tension, and intensifies the formation of identification processes, which leads to constant dilemmas in the search for and definition of one's identity.

The theoretical assumptions connected with the formation of cultural identity, which have been made for the present analysis, induced research activity. The sample group was selected using the purpose-chance method. The purpose elements are gender, place of residence and age of the students. The subjects of the study were 1000 middle school students aged 12 to 15, from a number of schools located in the Polish-Czech border zone in the Province of Silesia. The study was carried out in September 2006. 962 questionnaires were accepted for analysis, which represents 96.2% of the assumed sample. In the sample group the girls constituted 55%, and the boys 45%. 44% of the subjects live in the countryside while 56% live in towns. In the study a direct (half-open) question was put to the subjects: Who do you feel you are?, rather an inhabitant of your town/village than…; rather a Silesian than…; more a Pole than…; rather a European than…; rather a citizen of the world than…; equally each of these identities, other. In selecting of the sample group care was taken to ensure that the sample was representative. The survey was carried out among young people in schools by the author of the present study.

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[2] Melchior writes more extensively about this issue. The problem of an individual living on the border of two cultures, two societies, who having experienced rejection from both sides, faces the "crisis of acknowledgement", was analysed by Taylor (1992).

Diagram: Middle school students' sense of cultural identity in the Polish-Czech border zone

I feel (a/an)
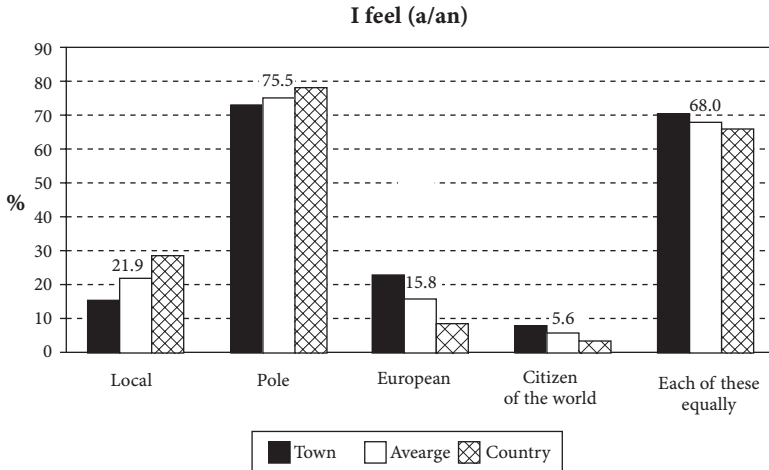
The data analysis did not yield any gender-originated differences in the sense of belonging to the regional, national, European or global community. However, minor differences can be observed in terms of the place of residence; the smaller the respondents' local community (town or village), the more frequent the declaration of the sense of national affiliation. Then, the larger the community, the more frequently the young people declare the sense of nationality, Europeanism or citizenship of the world.

A vast majority of the young people declared a sense of national membership (75.5%), and 'equally each of these identities', which means they feel also Europeans and citizens of the world (68.0%). Only a few individuals indicated that they felt rather Europeans than members of a national group or that they felt citizens of the world rather than members of a nation.

Declaring national affiliation among young people from the Polish-Czech borderland has increased in relation to the data from the 1990s (cf. Lewowicki, 1994). Already a few years ago children's hierarchies of values, among other things, were changing (cf. Lewowicki, 1992). The evidence presented in this analysis that testifies the process of further increase in the role of the identity and its traditionally significant elements.

Teenagers identify themselves with their local community (21.9%), which is manifest in declarations like: I am a Silesian, a Cieszyn citizen, a Wisła citizen, etc. Identity is formed most lastingly and effectively in an environment with strong social bonds, and the community of Silesia is an example of such a community.

Although private fatherlands may lose their relative significance in a specific period in history, they endure and continue to be important. Despite the fact that identity is related to an individual, it is to a considerable degree collective in nature. An indication of the sense of national identity is the reference to family tradition, to local tradition, which is carried on in a family. Silesia is a region rich in social and cultural organisations, which make its inhabitants more active. The power of tradition and influence are mobilising factors. The Silesians have kept their sense of regional patriotism for ages. The People of Silesia and notably Silesian governing elite had a sense of belonging to the Polish ethnic group already in the Middle Ages. As the memory of belonging to the state of Poland was fading, Silesian regional awareness began to emerge. Later, the regional awareness was maintained, connected with strong identification with "small fatherlands". This characteristic of group and territorial identity has endured in Silesia up to the present day.

Conclusions

The process of the integration of Europe, globalisation, pluralisation and the democratisation of societies raises national and ethnic awareness. To a greater and greater degree we are able to sense what a foreign invasion means in the media, industry and trade, when we are reduced to the role of pariahs. Therefore, it is worth guarding family models of regional and national culture, instilling ideals which stand in stark contrast to the illusions of mass man and caring for the development of consciousness based on knowledge, on the most elevated models of our culture and mature sensitivity. This consciousness should be protected by such institutions as parliament, local government, school, theatre, etc. National culture is the deepest layer, which protects the sovereignty of individuals in their internal dimension. It is also a unique code, unintelligible to others, which unites a nation. Young people realise that native culture stands on guard for humanity. Drawing on national heritage it is possible to save the human in ourselves, a nation in society and a homeland in Europe.

The sense of being a Pole is a value for teenagers. Young people thus manifest their autonomy and bond with the community in the context of the advancing processes of universalisation and globalisation. Promoting and further enriching the traditionally Polish characteristics (hospitality, ability to cope with extremely hard situations, love for freedom and fatherland) will strengthen our position in Europe, providing that we break free from emotions. Thus, in education – we put a lot more emphasis on cultivating such skills as understanding the Other, being able to see interdependence, negotiation, carrying out common projects and solv-

ing conflicts showing respect for the values of pluralism, mutual understanding and life in peace. This kind of activity will prepare young people to communicate with other people and with regional, supra-regional and ethnic groups.

National identification can be viewed as the next stage of making roots, which enables the acquisition of strength and faith, in effect making it possible to go to the borders of one's own culture with motivation to open for and acquaint oneself with other cultures. This stage of making roots is realised with resort to family, local and regional heritage and it proves indispensable in an era of globalisation (cf. Nikitorowicz, 2005).

The research results prompt us to identify and focus on the phenomenon of cultural ambiguity, openness and orientation towards other cultures, eagerness to draw from their riches. It is sensible to expect that young people are to a large extent willing to take responsibility for the future of Europe and the world. The absence of the danger of losing one's national identity allows perception of oneself to the same degree as a member of a nation, Europe and the world.

Already in the 1990s Tadeusz Lewowicki highlighted the fact that the "dynamics of social life – in the area of traditional understanding of national identity and perception of integrative inter- and supra-national processes – is not limited to the co-occurrence of two tendencies. Firstly, it is maintenance and crystallisation of national (state, ethnic, local, cultural, religious) identity and, secondly – the formation of new supra-national identity" (cf. Lewowicki, 1994). The study results seem to bring evidence that the understanding of cultural identity undergoes major transformations.

The significant "three-dimensionality" of identification (I feel equally a Pole, a European, a citizen of the world) and numerous choices of the sense of nationality allow a presumption that the processes of European integration with simultaneous respect for and preservation of family, regional and national values have been successful.

Young people realise that the future will depend to an ever-larger degree on actions taken within local, regional and national communities on the one hand, and on the participation in the European community and in the processes of globalisation on the other. Social changes take place by resorting to the internal resources and a possibility can be offered by every region and nation and through the abilities of implementing that offer as well, which the European Union does. The subjects of the transformations are local communities and, on the other hand, creative individuals living in those communities.

Social behaviour of maturing and with respect to young people's maturing at the beginning of the 21st century is becoming inadequate. Ambivalence appears to be one of the characteristics of every social progress, and in our culture it is particu-

larly enhanced in the period of growing up. It is not associated with a lack of order or principle. This ambivalence is entwined in the intricate process of identity formation, connected with the high degree of complexity of the researched reality. Social reality abounds in ambiguities and obscurities (Huntington, 2003).

Human identity is influenced throughout an individual's lifetime by processes that take place globally. In the contemporary world "we have no choice: we have to choose" – writes Anthony Giddens (1984; 2002). Choice is no longer a matter of possibility but necessity. The modern cultural supermarket pulls out the traditional roots, but in return it offers a broad range of means which can serve as material for building new roots, offer them on the social scene, and possibly, believe in them. According to Gordon Mathews (2005) the cultural supermarket seems to go beyond the market in the area of choices and human identity. In this context, the process of becoming and choosing oneself is a process which brings together and integrates various particular identifications into something which is more than a simple sum.

The issues of the awareness of cultural identity find solution in a specific model of the complex identity of contemporary young people. The tendencies to the emergence of a new model / models of identity have already been indicated years ago by Lewowicki (1998:15). For example, "the model of complex national-European or national-universal identity of future generations and by Nikitorowicz (1995, 1997: 85-95) the concept of the formation of borderland man with scattered or dispersed cultural identity. It is possible that the present model is more adequate to represent reality and gives hope for the successful solution of discrepancies between national, regional, supra national and individual ambitions and desires.

In the light of the evidence derived from the study it can be observed that objective environmental conditions (type of relations, communication between people, social bonds) determine not only the social activity of the people inhabiting a given territory and the process of cultural identity formation. It also determines any activity undertaken by educational institutions.

In educational practice there are many examples of well-realised regional, European and multicultural education focused on selected communities, their culture tolerating "otherness". However, it is hard to determine whether there is a process of replacing multicultural education by multicultural education focused on an acquaintance with and mutual intermingling of different cultures, deriving values from other cultures, bringing people and their cultures together, while maintaining their distinctness and identity[3]. This issue requires an investigation

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[3] Examples of thus conceived and implemented ideas of multicultural education can be found in the works by Lewowicki (2006a, 2006b).

into the educational processes realised in schools of various types and levels. It is possible that in borderland conditions, broadly conceived multicultural education takes place more within the circle of a local community, in peer groups and in the family rather than on the school grounds.

Recognising the role of multicultural education in the maintenance and development of unity as well as variety in European societies is emphasised by the Council of Europe's documents. These documents are titled *The Declaration by the European Ministers of Education on Multicultural Education in the New European Context*, 21 session, 10-12 November 2003, Athens, Greece, *Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education "Multicultural Education: managing diversity, strengthening democracy"*. The Council of Europe recommends undertaking appropriate actions focused on multicultural education at the level of curriculum design, school management and teacher training. In the light of these recommendations, it seems crucial to prepare teachers of all school types and levels of educational institutions to make them sensitive to the issues of the multicultural pedagogy. It means the pedagogy of mutual acquaintance and engagement, acquaintance with neighbouring culture, enhancing mutual understanding and preparation for more effective use of the common inheritance.

Contemporary times are filled with choices, individual and collective dialogues. Ever more encompassing consumerism, ethical egoism, nationalism and populism are serious challenges for politicians, societies and educational systems.

Multicultural pedagogy opens horizons of culturally diverse reality before individuals and groups. Creating conditions for the acquisition of cultural, social and individual identity, it does not juxtapose the processes of individualism and collectivism. Pedagogical theory and practice should find strong support in the actions taken by state institutions and social forces.

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