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***I was expecting her to be a fanatic Catholic,
but she was not***
**How International Exchange Programmes
Reduce Prejudice**

Abstract

The text deals with the question of the influence of international exchange programmes on reducing ethnic prejudices in their participants. Apart from a brief introduction into the issue of reducing prejudice, it comprises 392 free responses of Czech respondents, predominantly students, who have filled out an online survey as part of the project *Intergroup Attitudes and Intergroup Contact in Central Europe*. The participants gave accounts of their real contacts with Polish people, oftentimes within the framework of international exchange programmes, Erasmus in particular. Based on the comparison of the results of the qualitative analysis of the statements with the conditions of successful reduction of prejudices, one can suggest that international exchange programmes should have a positive influence on reducing negative ethnic stereotypes and prejudices among their participants.

Keywords: *international exchange programmes, Lifelong Learning Programmes, Erasmus generation, prejudice reduction, qualitative analyses, students, Czechs, Poles*

Introduction

Prejudice is a type of attitude affecting individuals as well as communities. Prejudice manifests itself in a fixed attitude used by an individual when judging others on the basis of some arbitrary attribute possessed by the target (Hayes, 1996,

pp. 119, 147). According to its definition, prejudice can be either negative or positive in evaluative terms, but when talking about ethnic prejudice most authors write about a negative attitude (Reber, 1995, p. 590). As based on negative traits assumed to be uniformly displayed by all members of a group, prejudice is irrational and its emotional background makes it stable and resistant to change.

Ethnic prejudice is closely associated with stereotyping. A group's name is connected with an abstract prototype or a set of features that are considered, according to social teaching among others, to be possessed by the group as a whole. When a person meets a stranger the stereotypes are diminishing the resulting anxiousness by providing some information about him or her even though race and ethnicity are thought to trigger stereotyping in almost every case (Výrost, Slameník, 2008, pp. 363–364).

This text is devoted to the issue of reducing negative stereotypes and prejudice in the actual conditions of international exchange programmes, Erasmus in particular. It is based on the responses to one open question as part of a survey distributed within the *Intergroup Attitudes and Intergroup Contact in Central Europe* project conducted at the Institute of Psychology, Academy of Science of the Czech Republic.

The aim of this text is to show why and how exchange programmes, like Erasmus, can influence the reduction of negative ethnic stereotypes and prejudice in their participants. In order to do so I will 1. Present a brief introduction into the issue of reducing prejudice; 2. Demonstrate a qualitative analysis of the participants' responses and its results; 3. Summarize the results of such an analysis with reference to the theory being presented and within the basic socio-cultural context of statements and comments presented.

Modern approaches to the conditions of reducing prejudice

Prejudice is explained in many ways; according to Wittig and Grant-Thompson, who summarized theories of prejudice and models of prejudice reduction, among those ways are evolutionary perspectives, personality/individual difference approaches, theories of group identity, and various social cognitive approaches (Wittig, Grant-Thompson, 1998, pp. 796–797).

Principles of reducing prejudice were, at the earliest stage, formulated by Gordon Allport in 1954 in his work *The Nature of Prejudice*. His Contact Hypothesis emphasizes the social situation, targets individual prejudicial attitude change and finally proposes several conditions for reducing prejudice and enhancing tolerance.

Contact Hypothesis became one of the most long-lived and researched principles of reducing prejudice (Wittig, Grand-Thompson, 1998, p. 795).

Inasmuch as different authors have focused on different variables, they have developed different versions of the contact theory. As a result, more than 50 different mediating variables have been suggested by different contact theorists to specify the conditions for the positive effects of contact (Forbes, 2004, p. 74). Yet, many authors still work with the “original” five conditions, out of which four were suggested by Allport in 1954 and one was added in 1978 by Cook. The views of Nicky Hayes are briefly presented here, including her declaration of taking all the psychological evidence together while suggesting a list of five conditions of reducing prejudice. Those five main conditions, which need to be present in order to reduce prejudice and which were mentioned in her popular academic textbook *Principles of Social Psychology* (1996), are as follows:

1. The participants need to have an equal status.

Visible achievement by members of a minority group and equal relationship between members of dominant and minority groups create new data and attitudes are often revised.

2. There must be a potential for personal acquaintance.

It must be possible for an individual to get to know the members of the other group on a personal level. However, it does not mean that contact alone is enough to reduce prejudice. Simply putting two conflicting groups in contact with one another can have the effect of actually reinforcing the prejudice, rather than reducing it.

3. There must be contact with non-stereotypical individuals.

It is harder for a prejudiced individual to maintain stereotyping when they are continually faced with members of the stereotyped group who do not fit in the stereotype; thus, contact with non-stereotypical others can have the effect of reducing prejudice, as it forces the individual to deal with the others on a human, personal basis.

4. There must be social support for contact between groups.

If the surrounding social environment favours inter-group contact and equal, fair treatment, prejudice is more likely to be reduced.

5. There should be some occasion for co-operative effort.

Joint efforts serve to widen social boundaries; members of the other group for a while become *us* instead *them*. Co-operative effort, breaking down this distinction (which is the major factor in determining prejudice), is a powerful tool in reducing prejudiced attitudes (Hayes, 1996, pp. 125–127).

Methods

Project *Intergroup Attitudes and Intergroup Contact in Central Europe* is focused on relations between the Czech Republic and its four neighbours: Austria, Germany, the Slovak Republic and Poland. The main data collection method used was an online survey comprising a moderate amount of attitude and evaluation scales and one open question: *To start off, try to remember a situation where you came into contact with a Pole, whether it was during your visit abroad or here in the Czech Republic. How did the person act in this concrete situation? How did you act? Please write it down into the empty space*¹. Question put in such a non-suggesting manner triggered immensely valuable free responses. Part of the received statements was naturally very brief or carrying no data of value but mostly they were so substantial and altogether showing such a big variety of information that their potential enabled (and enables) a detailed quantitative content analysis of the statements in all pairs of neighbours, as well as various qualitative analyses based on several topics from the respondents' statements (e.g. Kouřilová, Hřebíčková, 2011, Petrjánošová, 2012, Leix, 2012).

For the purpose of analysis devoted to the subject of reducing prejudice I focused on the bulk of statements by Czechs regarding Polish people. While both Czechs and Poles expressed their enthusiasm in regard to their contact with each other during the exchange programmes, the Polish respondents did not exhibit almost any negative stereotypes and prejudice towards Czech people. This is indubitably related to the continuing exceptional popularity of the Czech Republic in Poland, unbeknownst to most Czech people; I refer here to the countrywide survey results of the public opinion (Omyła-Rudzka, 2012). In contrast, the statements of the Czechs exposed the existence of clear, predominantly negative stereotypes and prejudice towards the Poles and thus establish more suitable ground for researching ways of reducing them².

The researched material consisted of 392 free responses of the participants who filled in the survey forms sent to the Silesian University of Opava. One can thus assume that they were mostly students, which is coincidentally also implied by

¹ Version for the Czech participants. Within the project I work primarily with the free statements – answers to this open question – of the pair Czechs and Poles commenting on each other.

² Some of them are presented in this study; more of them are to be seen in the text „*Pepiki*” i „*Pšonci*”: *co u siebie wzajemnie lubią, co ich zaskakuje, czego nie lubią, a co wywołuje ich uśmiech?* (Leix, in press), containing more extensive qualitative analyses of both Czech and Polish respondents' statements from the same project.

their statements. The respondents declared to be between 18 and 49 years of age with the major part comprising 20–22, primarily women.

I refrained from using a computer for the purposes of the analysis. First of all, I did not want to be influenced by the specific software authors' predispositions nor did I want to distance myself from the data; secondly, given the brevity of the responses and long-time experience working with texts, I made do only with paper and pencil (Weitzman, 2003, p. 331, Gavora, 2006, p. 152). I went through sheets of the participants' statements with a pencil looking for and marking the items containing anything related to the relationships during the exchange programmes and to the prejudice reduction, which I registered during previous analyses (e.g. Leix 2011, 2012, in press). After second reading of all 392 statements, concrete examples started to recur; after another few readings I received a few sets of statements grouped according to the particular wider topics or categories. (Agar, 1980, p. 104; Gavora, 2006, p. 129). Analytical procedures similar to the one described above, in which there is no predetermined exact protocol and the way of analysing is created individually are widespread among the researchers working with texts (Peräkylä, 2010, p. 870).

In the following part, due to limited space available, I will present only a group of the most frequently represented shorthand topics/categories related to the theory of reducing prejudice and comment on each of them very briefly. I will use 1 to 4 of the original statements or their parts to illustrate every topic presented. Statements are translated from Czech and carry their file identification number, as well as the basic information about their authors (age, sex).

Findings

Positive findings made during real contact

When I was at an exchange stay in Austria I had a Polish roommate. He was quiet, polite, he helped me anytime possible, we chatted. We had a good relation. (235: female, 22)

Most often I meet Poles in a school environment. In those circumstances, they seemed to be very hard-working and highly motivated to achieve the best results possible. During personal contact I found them to be friendly, polite and very proud. (251: f, 23)

It was during an exchange stay of Polish students in the Czech Republic. I had personal contact with them at some disco in Opava. (...) After some time I decided to talk to those Polish boys so I could practise my very passive knowledge of the Polish language.

I also brought my female friends along to meet them, and they had nothing against it. They were very nice, friendly and they treated my female friends with courtesy. (52: f, 21)

The above citations illustrate the positive experience of Czech students when dealing with Polish students. Contact was made in different contexts – in dormitories, at school, at a disco.

There are other items included in my set of statements that give account of different types of exchange programmes as well:

I had the opportunity of being a part of an exchange programme together with a choir from Poland. They accommodated us very gladly in their own rooms, during breakfast we had a vivid discussion; they were very helpful. After one of our joint performances, and after bash and soiree which followed that concert, we got on our coach and some of our Polish hosts followed us in their cars. Our coach broke down on the road. One Polish man called a lot of his friends and relatives and during half an hour, another group of 6 cars arrived (it was after 3 a.m.) and we were safely and comfortably transported to our hosts' places. (94: f, 23)

The next category is likewise focusing on positive experiences of young Czechs in regard to Poles, however this time they contain an explicitly expressed surprise related to positive characteristics of the latter.

Positive findings made during actual contact – even surprise

I met a Polish student at our faculty where he was studying the same programme as me. I was surprised at his gallantness and courtesy towards female students, such as letting them go first through a door or opening it for them. I have never witnessed such a behaviour in any of my Czech male friends. (310: f, 22)

I had the opportunity of visiting their school, where they treated us really great. It was during an event at primary school in which all parents of the Polish students were involved. Their willingness to support financially all of the programmes took us by surprise. Such an attitude is unlikely in our country. (196: f, 20)

Because our school allows for exchange stays with a Polish university, two Polish students became our schoolmates. I was surprised what a great sense of humour they had. (128: f, 20)

There are many similar statements made by the respondents relating to various types of exchange programmes (in this case programmes between universities

and between primary schools). I have chosen the responses that amply illustrate the point of such findings being both inter-gender and intergenerational; a female student is amazed by the courtesy of Polish students (which she has never experienced from her Czech friends), another student is pleasantly surprised by the great sense of humour of his Polish schoolmates and a Czech parent compares the willingness of Polish parents to co-finance a children programme to the expected hesitancy of his countrymen.

Regardless of the unambiguous influence of these findings on the attitudes towards the given nationality, the source of the portrayed surprise remains a question. Does it stem only from the objectively great amount of positive characteristics of the said Poles or is it partly caused by the Czech respondents' prejudice towards them as well? Basing the conclusion on my work up to this point with the Czech respondents' statements, including the possibility of comparison with the statements of respondents from other countries, I think that both reasons might have contributed.

In the following part we will find explicitly expressed stereotypes and prejudice of the Czech respondents towards the Poles.

Actual contact vs. stereotypes and prejudice

One Polish girl, my girlfriend's roommate, had been studying a movie study programme in Prague. She was communicative and friendly. I was afraid she would change her friendly attitude towards us once she learned of our sexual orientation because Poles are very conservative in this matter. She did not, not even a bit. Before she went back home we invited her to see Petřín [nice hill and view point in Prague]. We became friends. (215: f, 25)

In this statement (also being a source for the paraphrased title of this text) the respondent directly declares her fears of expected behaviour of the Polish student based on one of the most deep-rooted Czech stereotypes related to the Polish. The expected reaction did not occur and the situation ended up in friendship.

The next response is by a Czech student who deals with the same stereotype although, based on multiple encounters, he does realize the limit of the "Polish believer" stereotype:

When talking about Poles and their faith, pioussness will come to everyone's mind; it is a religious nation. But as far as the younger generation is concerned, I had the chance to discuss it with them and the actual situation is that most of them are non-believers, going to church as a tradition or out of habit. (269: m, 23)

The values of the following statement within the analysis lies, among other reasons, in the fact that it points out the prejudice on both of the communicating sides, albeit the existence of “pseudo-truths” and “mistaken judgments” can be revealed during the communication process.

When I was studying in Poland, most Poles were very friendly and they were interested in me and in the Czech Republic. Many times, we had an opportunity to shatter common myths and explain mistaken judgements we had about each other. (...) There was no grudge or spite between us. Rather, we used to make fun of our history and of our countries' past. They even crowned me to be the Czech king during a student party. They are like us. (236: m, 22).

It is of note that only students of adequate education are able to make fun of history in this way. Young people lacking the knowledge would not know of the countries' identical rulers and of periods of close cooperation in the past; they will be by and large influenced by the experiences of their parents and grandparents (the Second World War and especially a number of territorial conflicts) which are a source of negative attitudes in both countries.

They are the same as us

Accounts of contact with a citizen of a foreign country often end up with a claim that *they* are virtually like *us*, as did statement 236 above. I will present a few more:

I met Poles during international projects organized by my high school. We visited their school and they visited ours. They acted in the same way as we did, we did not have any problem with them, and except for the language there was no difference between us. (248: f, 19)

During my Erasmus study stay in Germany I spent most of the time with Poles, they created a strong group of students, they were very friendly, helpful and national pride radiated from them. In this circle, I felt as among “us”, as if it were among Czech friends. (234: f, 25)

In descriptions of this type the respondents give account of situations where direct contact with a foreigner resulted in finding that they are “people like us”; *they* are getting closer to *us* and thus a strong determinant of the prejudice weakens.

Opportunity for cooperation

I was a part of a Czech-Polish project, Prevention of Pathologies, which took place in Poland. During the week-long stay I had the chance to experience my neighbours' behaviour, their culture, habits and their nature. I was grateful to the Polish citizens and students for having nothing against presenting their culture or showing their city to me. (...) We were all tolerant towards each other, we did not mind talking to each other, having to help each other the whole week, studying or just staying together almost daily. During this programme we completed a medical course where Czechs and Poles were in one group and we had to pull together. Poles made a very nice impression on me and I would not hesitate to say that the feeling was mutual. (386: f, 19)

“We had to pull together” explains the condition of “opportunity for cooperation” with no need for further explanation.

Study versus work – a different mind-set

In the wake of the hypothesis of the positive influence of the Lifelong Learning Programmes on the reduction of prejudice in their participants come the statements via which the Czech respondents compare their experiences concerning the Poles, both in the context of student and work visits. The overwhelming majority of utterances suggest a uniform tendency towards considering the school environment to be the one connected with more positive experiences:

A few different experiences. Both bad and good. Mainly abroad. A good one: younger generation, in Slovenia – the Erasmus/Socrates programme: open and friendly communication; very good behaviour; similar way of thinking and understanding reality; good language skills. Bad one: older generation, in Great Britain – my study stay combined with part-time job: shame, aggressive behaviour with signs of lower intellect. (135: f, 23)

Also the above-cited statement, 215, by a girl who was positively surprised by a Polish student, continues with these notes about other Poles:

A lot of Poles I met in Norway, where we were working on farms, were annoying, stealing stuff, trying to avoid work or making shady deals, not to mention making sexual allusions. When I told them I didn't want to be in contact with them they didn't accept it. (215: f, 25)

Conclusion

International exchange programmes seem to fulfil conditions for reducing negative stereotypes and prejudice. Strong social support for contact between groups, equal status for all participants and creating potential for personal acquaintance are among the very core ideas of international exchange programmes like Erasmus. Qualitative analysis of the free statements from Czechs verified it as well as showed concrete examples of co-operative effort and contact with non-stereotypical individuals. As a result of real contact, Czech respondents describe their wonder (sometimes even amazement) at the positive characteristics they discovered in Poles. Comparing Poles with themselves, they sometimes even conclude, that *they* are, in fact, the same as *us*. Additionally, according to the respondents' statements, educational, cultural and sport international exchange programmes are predominantly better for the development of relationships than work stays.

By discussing the relationship between international exchange programmes and ethnic stereotypes and prejudice, the paper contributes to the very up-to-date but still under-represented topic in social sciences and humanities. The results of this study – qualitative analysis of the responses obtained in one region of the country – are not sufficient for producing any generalisation. However, they are consistent with the results of quantitative-oriented studies, according to which programmes such as Erasmus offer – next to unsuspected teaching and learning opportunities – social learning and the elimination of prejudice and stereotypes (e.g. Sebauer, 2003).

In the specific case of the relationship of Czechs towards Poles, the effect of reducing prejudice, which is connected with participation in international exchange programmes, could seem like highly desirable reduction of the negative impact of Czech mass-media which have been popularizing negative stereotypes and prejudice of Poland and its people for quite some time now³. Mass-media

³ What did the popular Czech stereotypes of Poles look like at the end of the eighties and nineties of the twentieth century can be seen in Ivo Bystřičan's *Zanussiho nejen italská pračka*. The author of this text (being a Czech himself) also confers that Czechs are not interested in Poland, except for easily popularised scandals (Nový Prostor, 1997, no. 293, p. 7. Full issue, dedicated to "Unknown neighbour", to see at <http://www.novyprostor.cz/pdf/293.pdf>). For the following two decades the situation was similar; even serious magazines openly used popular stereotypes when writing about Poland – for example the cover of the *Respekt*, to see at <https://plus.google.com/photos/114588478345569499171/albums/5739389905164788657/5739389902888800594>. Situation improved somewhat during and after the UEFA EURO 2012; Czech fans and correspondents were very surprised by the warm approach of Polish fans, and Czech mass-media published many texts re-discovering the long-neglected neighbour.

are known for a huge influence on creating stereotypes and prejudice – but the influence is the greater the lower the education of its audience is. The authors of the analysed responses belong to the so-called *Erasmus generation*, which is being referred to as the best-educated generation that will be deciding about our world's future (e.g. Benhold, 2005).

Lifelong Learning Programmes like Erasmus could admittedly face a lot of critique, but it seems they offer solid grounds that can help reduce ethnic prejudice among their participants.

But while they offer good conditions, the rest depends on the students themselves.

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